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What I Stress in Tai Chi.

I originally wrote this piece so students could go on the Internet to see what they might expect of me in a course I planned to teach. I was trying to start a Tai Chi club at the local civic Rec Center. That failed. I still present this piece as an idea of what I have in mind with Tai Chi. See the end of this note for how I do NOT teach Tai Chi. See a companion piece on the role of base, repetition, and variation in learning martial arts.

Tai Chi began as a martial art. I think of Tai Chi as a martial art. I think of Tai Chi as primarily a martial art rather than primarily a Taoist teaching plan or a health plan. I usually think of martial uses for moves when I do moves in Tai Chi. It is important to know what Tai Chi came from, why it moves as it does, why it makes you feel good as you do it, and how it can be used as a martial art. Unless you dislike martial arts and mild physical contact, you should learn Tai Chi first in a class that includes teaching Tai Chi as a martial art. After you see Tai Chi as a martial art, then you can decide if you want to learn Tai Chi more as a martial art, or if you want to do something else with Tai Chi, or if you want both. If you dislike martial arts, and your Tai Chi group includes martial arts, then you should switch to another group.

If you do not want to learn Tai Chi as a martial art, and you wish to avoid anything that feels like fighting, you should not take Tai Chi from me. Many Tai Chi instructors teach it as something else without any martial arts. I do not like their approach, and I say more about it below. I do not think it is possible to mix in one class the people who are not comfortable with Tai Chi as a martial art with the people who are comfortable with Tai Chi as a martial art. It is possible to mix in one class people who enjoy Tai Chi as a martial art with people who are comfortable with Tai Chi as a martial art but who do not pursue it primarily that way.

If you accept that Tai Chi is a martial art, especially if you actively want to learn Tai Chi as a martial art, remember this: You cannot learn any martial art without making physical contact with other people. You cannot learn any martial art without sometimes getting pushed, pulled, blocked, thrown, mildly punched, or mildly kicked; and without doing that to others. You cannot learn any martial art without some sparring. You can, and should, learn a martial art without ever getting really hurt and without ever really hurting other people. You should never study an art that requires you to get repeatedly punched in the head or that expects you to repeatedly punch people in the head. Of course, in real life, on the street, you only hurt other people when they intend to really hurt you or other innocent people, that is, in defense.

I understand the concept of "chi" ("qi" or "ki") but I do not stress it. I avoid it. It misleads Americans into false mysticism, like "the Force" in the "Star Wars" movies, but less fun and more hurtful. It is better to do Tai Chi without worrying about chi, and to let any chi happen on its own, if it does happen. You can get a lot of benefit from Tai Chi without ever worrying about chi. Chi will flow whether you know it or not. If you want to learn more about chi, I suggest you learn directly about chi from someone besides me, someone who is interested in chi in particular. You can learn about chi from other Chinese "internal" arts such as

Hsing I (Xing I) or Pa Kua (Ba Gua). You can learn about chi from Aikido and Hapkido. The “ki” in their names is the Japanese or Korean spelling of “chi”.

Rather than directly stress chi, I stress you should: have a good base; keep a good base while moving and changing stances; sink low; feel "rooted"; originate moves from the center of the body; think of moves as an extension of the body rather than as positions of the arms and legs; use force from the center of the body when striking, blocking, or pulling; see all moves as variations on a few basic principles (patterns); move your body according to a few basic principles (patterns); and develop sensitivity in the skin, mostly in the palms and forearms, to feel the opponent well and to respond early.

I also stress: movement based on ovals and figure 8s; engaging the opponent; yielding to an opponent's force ("riding"), partly so as to be able to return; "sticking" to an opponent with some parts of the body; feeling both force ("yang") and yielding ("yin") at the same time; and using both "face" moves and "corner" moves. From karate, I stress focus in blows and blocks. I have learned some throws and joint locks but I am not adept yet at mixing them with the Tai Chi that I originally learned.

I know Yang style Tai Chi. If you want to study Yang style, you should start by learning the basic Yang style 108 step solo form. It takes at least six months to learn the Yang 108 step form, and another six months to get comfortable with it. That year of from training is only the beginning. It takes several years to really get a handle on what is happening. Traditionally, a student learned the form on the right side for five years without doing anything else, and then learned the form on the left side for an additional three years without doing anything else. Not many people have that much patience now. You can learn the Yang 108 quickly externally as a sequence of wooden steps, maybe in two months; that is the way it is taught in most classes now; but I strongly discourage you from learning it that way. Originally, the steps were not poses or dance steps, as they are usually taught now. The steps are not discrete moves. The steps are not like insects that you can stick a pin into and put on a display tray once you have them “learned”.

When taught externally and woodenly, each step is taught in only way. Any variations are considered incorrect. That attitude too is wrong. I was not taught that way. My teacher, Mr. Ho, never did the same move the same way twice, and he stressed the need to see variation within moves. A good teacher has to know how much variation is consistent with the identity of a single move, and when variation causes one move to shade into another move. While teaching the solo form, I teach variations on all moves, and I teach simple applications of all moves.

After you know the solo form and are comfortable with it, you should learn the Yang 88 step two-person interactive (combat) form. It takes another six months to learn the rudiments of the 88 step two person form, and another six months, about a year in total, to get comfortable with the form. It takes longer yet to become adept at it. Again, you can learn the two person form more quickly as external movements only but I discourage that.

In addition to the Yang 88 step two-person form, Yang style uses small exercises of two people to learn how to move around a person, contact a person, let go, push, pull, etc. These small exercises are called “tui shou” or “join(ed) hands” or “push hands”, and “san shou” or “joined legs”. I know only a few of these small interactions because my instructors preferred to go directly to the 88 and to use portions of the 88

for interaction training. I don't know how many "tui shou" and "san shou" there are. I mix them in when I feel like doing so but mostly I prefer to follow my instructor and use the 88.

You should practice every day, at least half an hour, and, hopefully two hours. Traditionally, you should practice no less than four hours and no more than five hours a day, but nobody who has to work for a living, raise a family, or tend a house, can do that. Now I practice about an hour to an hour-and-a-half a day. If I had steady employment, I might practice less. When I was young, I did more. When I was in academia, I did less. Contrary to myth, there is no best time. Any time feels good and gives benefit. You can benefit from as little as two minutes. You can do Tai Chi several brief times daily. You should get at least one continuous half-hour stretch of practice daily. As with any exercise, if you do it shortly after a meal, you will feel bad; and, if you do it less than an hour before you go to bed, you might not fall sleep right away. If you are a morning person, and you do it in the morning, you will feel better the rest of the day.

If you learn Tai Chi only as a series of external "postures" or "moves", you will get bored after ten minutes of practice, like playing nothing but major scales on a trumpet. That is why I teach variations on moves, and ideas about movement, from the beginning, so you will not get bored, so you will indeed practice on your own, and because variation on "moves" is an integral part of Tai Chi. You must be willing to repeat the same "move" thousands of times, which can mean many repeating it hundreds of times on any given day. See accompanying note on repetition.

It takes about five years to get mildly proficient at any martial art, and it takes at least ten years to get moderately proficient.

I am not very proficient but I do understand the basics, and I can teach the basics. That is all I know, and all I can teach. I stress that I am not a master, sifu, or sensei.

Tai Chi is an "internal" art while karate is an "external" art. See other notes. Traditionally, an external art takes a minimum of five years (for karate, a black belt) while an internal art takes a minimum of ten years to gain reliable basic confidence. Don't let those time periods scare you off. You will be able to see applications right away, and your self-defense might improve a little right away. If you have an urgent self-defense need, please see another note. Otherwise, don't be in a hurry. If you wish to become adept at martial arts, plan on at least five years, more likely ten. Get what you can out of it as you do it. If you take this attitude, and practice for at least an hour a day, you will progress more quickly than if you worry about levels and about being a master.

The rest of this note was prompted by recent experiences I had trying to teach Tai Chi.

I can imagine learning the principles of movement in Tai Chi and then not developing fighting applications or not even seeing fighting implications, but it is hard for me to imagine that. If you tried that, I think you would go seriously astray. It would be much better to know some of Tai Chi as a martial art, and then to let go of the martial art later, than to overlook the martial art entirely.

It is true that Tai Chi has roots in Taoist principles that were not necessarily tied to martial arts originally. Those Taoist principles can help you with the quality of your life, although I don't think it is a good idea to

rely on them to make your life wonderful. If you wish to learn those Taoist principles without any fighting implications, I think it is NOT a good idea to do that by going through Tai Chi. Learn them directly on their own. If you wish to use them in Tai Chi later, you will be well prepared.

When I tried to teach from 2011 through 2012, most people who came to learn Tai Chi were not really interested in Tai Chi as such, they were interested in “magic dance”. They wanted a set of movements that would catapult them into health and vigor. They really wanted health and vigor, knew they had to move their bodies to get that, and wanted a regimen of bodily movement that would do the trick as easily as possible. They wanted something that would be fun, no real effort, and great benefit. In brief, they wanted “magic dance”. They settled on Tai Chi as the magic dance that would do it for them. I think this is a bad way to go into Tai Chi.

If you seek health, you need to exercise, but there is no magic exercise that will give you health by itself. If you seek vigor, the same comments apply. If you seek magic exercise, I have no further words. There is no magic exercise. If you seek exercise as part of a program to improve health and vigor, then I recommend swimming as a first choice, if you have access to a pool. If you can't use swimming, then I recommend walking, golf, or some kind of ballroom dance that does not hurt your feet.

(I do not recommend yoga for magic health and vigor because to do so is a disservice to real yoga. Real yoga is about spiritual advancement through meditation and moderate ascetic practice, it is not magic any more than Tai Chi is magic. I make no comment on most of the yoga that is taught in the United States other than to say it too is sold as magic yet it is not.)

Unfortunately, Tai Chi does have a reputation now as “magic dance”. It did not have that reputation when I first learned it in the 1970s, I did not learn it that way, and I don't see how you can learn real Tai Chi that way. I understand how Tai Chi got a reputation as “magic dance” but I urge you not to think of it that way. If magic dance is what you want, look for something else first. Be wary of people who teach Tai Chi as magic dance without first teaching Tai Chi as martial art or without being able to teach Tai Chi as martial art. If your instructor cannot teach Tai Chi as martial art, then your instructor cannot teach Tai Chi as magic dance. If you insist on Tai Chi as magic dance, then you must learn the basic Taoist principles such as yin and yang and chi, and you must read the old Taoist masters such as Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, and Lieh Tzu. If your Tai Chi teacher supposedly teaches Tai Chi as magic dance but cannot give a good account of fundamental Taoist ideas, then be wary.

Tai Chi is not a weight loss program, cure for high cholesterol, cure for cancer, cure for diabetes, cure for high blood pressure, cure for arthritis, cure for adolescent misbehavior, baby sitting activity, way to make your children into better people, way to bond the family, or stamina program. It is not a sexual booster. It is what it is, and only that. If you wish any other benefits, I recommend that you talk to your health care professional, and that you consider diet, moderate exercise with small weights and exercise bands, and low-impact exercise such as swimming, walking, and golf.