

On Pedagogy

Change – In Accordance With Its Own Principles

How I Teach Tai Chi

There is a famous Japanese Tea Ceremony adage. In the beginning, and for many years, a student should practice the form exactly as it has been taught to her or to him. Twenty years later, this dedicated student will begin, silently, to question certain ideas or procedures, without changing them. Fifteen years later this loyal student, now an older and experienced teacher, will modify the form, in miniscule ways, thus humbly contributing to the art after a lifetime of loving practice.

This has been my experience inside of an enjoyable 40-year practice.

My profession, throughout all those years, involved teaching people about their human structure, how it is naturally designed to work, and how to prevent injuring it. Gradually, I became aware, within the Tai Chi form, of the exact movements that were a strain for most people, and that, over time, often resulted in injury. These are the parts I have modified, ever so slightly

I have watched Tai Chi students, from various traditions, practice for many years. While benefiting profoundly, many were never able to solve their postural problems; they were never able to stand effortlessly upright, a key requisite for the practice of Tai Chi.

I have spent 40 years cultivating a refined use of my hands to help people release the chronic tensions that prevent easy uprightness, and that interfere with moving flexibly, powerfully, and naturally.

Students find this an enormous help, not only for their practice of Tai Chi, but also for their sense of comfort and confidence in their everyday lives.

As the pace of life grows faster, I find that my students have a hard time slowing down, neurologically. Often students are ready to begin class just as class ends.

This motivated me to design a preliminary Tai Chi class. This class consists of a series of simple movements, discovered slowly over 38 years, that allow students to understand, and to internalize, Tai Chi principles. After this class, students are ready to learn a form that is far more than beautiful choreography.

There is a tradition of preparing students before they begin learning Tai Chi. As the legend goes, a student wanted to study Tai Chi. He went and knocked on the teacher's door. No answer. The student left. Bright and early the next morning, he tried again. No answer, and so on for days, for weeks. One day the door opened. It was not the teacher, merely one of his students. The senior student told the aspiring student that if he wanted to study Tai Chi with his teacher, he would first have to practice, twice a day, standing on one leg, that leg flexed, with all his weight shifted onto it, while remaining perfectly easy and upright, until he could do so comfortably for one hour, on both his right leg and his left leg. This, the senior student said, would take about one year. He told the new student to come back when he was ready, and knock again.

A good story, but not my style.

Personally, I prefer to begin with new students immediately, attending to the particular issues that, if resolved, would prepare them to begin learning Tai Chi safely and enjoyably.

Learning the form, and then the sword form, is a joy. It takes three years to learn them cleanly and clearly. The time flies by.

Wanting my students to be able to practically apply the principles of Tai Chi into their everyday lives, I will often end class showing them how they can make real use of these principles when outside of class – for example, when out walking, when sitting at a computer, or when interacting with people.

I consider "everyday application work" an essential part of Tai Chi practice, especially if a Tai Chi student is to train with me to become a Tai Chi teacher. Part of the job of a graduate of The Movement School is to help make people sensitive, and able to apply that sensitivity to the demands and pleasures of everyday life.

Very few people practice Tai Chi as a fighting form. Most people practice Tai Chi to learn how to stop fighting - against themselves, and against others. They study to learn how not to hurt themselves, or other people. They study for their health, for their wellbeing, and to be able to move, throughout their entire lives, naturally and comfortably.

My form has changed subtly over 40years. These changes happened organically, growing out of a lifelong desire to understand the truth as to how we are functionally designed to move. I am not interested in being original just to be original. These minute but significant changes in the short Yang form emerged as I observed and solved my own problems, and the problems of my students.



These changes were made, and are taught, with deep respect to the long tradition of Tai Chi, which remains alive and changing, in accordance with its own principles.