

Bonsai Tai Chi

The Blog



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An instructor once told a group I was training with: “At best I can teach you 50-60% of tai chi. The rest is up to you.” I am not sure that he wasn’t being overly optimistic.

What an instructor can teach you is the form, and he can teach you how to do it properly. Whichever style you learn, the form is at its core. This, in fact, is true of most martial arts. You learn a series of movements which have practical applications for fighting or self defence. Every move in tai chi is potentially a defence or attack capable of stopping or disabling an opponent.

At this point two things are essential: you have to decide what you want from tai chi. That may change over the years as you develop but deciding whether you are looking for the health aspects of tai chi or maybe an exercise programme or whether you want to study tai chi as a martial art will dictate your training and must effect your approach to tai chi. Most important is finding the right teacher, one who can guide you through whichever aspect interests you right now but can also take you along the path and help you to develop as your focus changes. The thing to remember is, if all you learn are the movements and are not told what the point of each movement is, then the form is likely to be ‘empty’ and fulfil the common perception of ‘arm-waving’. And it probably won’t meet any of your needs especially if these include the martial aspects.

Ultimately tai chi lies beyond the form but it is important not to misunderstand this. Some people will talk of the ‘formless-form’. They will remark that their master no longer ‘uses’ the form (whatever that means). The problem is that these students will often then assume that they can bypass, rather than grow-beyond, the basis of tai chi chuan which actually lies within the form.

They see the master perform his apparent miracles and miss the years he spent perfecting his form probably under the tutelage of a master who was much sterner with him than he is with them and possibly under much more arduous conditions. There is a saying in tai chi ‘But da, but gau’ ‘Not to hit is not to teach’

It is said that each winter’s morning Yang Cheng Fu would send his sons outside to practise in freezing conditions and only let them back in for breakfast when he saw them stripping off their coats because their practice had made them so hot.

However, learning the movements is only the beginning of tai chi chuan. What my instructor was telling us is that, at some point, you have to make a leap into the unknown and discover for yourself what lies inside the movements. 🌀