

Bonsai Tai Chi

The Blog



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The opening of the Tao de Ching says ‘The name that can be named is not the true name.’ An enigma but it got me thinking about our training. Maybe the lesson we are being taught is not the lesson we are supposed to be learning.

I mean, we practice a transition from the form. Sometimes we do it for weeks. We struggle to get it right but we all ‘know’ the move at a physical level and even when we do make it work what will we have learned? Will we be any the wiser, will we actually understand?

Underlying every move, every transition there is a core principle. Get that right and the precise move doesn’t matter any more.

Well, it does of course, it still has to be right when you practice the form. We need the form, it is the core of tai chi, our training tool. Without it we would not be able to practice those core principles.

What we as students need to do is to listen properly to what we are being told and to put it into practice. It is a matter of learning not of being taught.

Regardless of the level you are at, much of our training comprises form correction. So if you find yourself being asked to repeat the same move in training session after training session, week after week and think you know the move, ask yourself: “Why? What’s going on, what am I missing?”

Probably at this point your impatient, western nature will be making you irritated with the instructor. You want to move on, to achieve your goal of learning tai chi. You think: “This person is deliberately holding me back.” After all you know this move, you do it every day when you practise the form (you do practise every day don’t you?).

So think, what are you missing here? Why is it that when the instructor tests you it never works? You get stuck, frozen to the spot, unable to move. I am sure you think that these blasted instructors have secret ways to stop students when they test them, that they do it deliberately. Trust me, your instructor is as frustrated as you are. He, (or she) wants you to ‘get it’, from their point of view you just aren’t listening.

So don’t just look at the move as a mechanical project. Think about it in depth: is your weighting right? (Forget 70/30 it is probably 100/zero.) If you are trying to move to the right maybe you need to shift left first; are you using spirals, sinking enough, rooted properly, what about linking? And while you are thinking about those, how about a little yi?

Continually repeating the move may be frustrating but probably the real lesson is to get all of the other elements. And remember, what you do for this move will apply equally to every other move. So look how much you will have learned.

The form is the tool we use to perfect our tai chi. Learning to do a single transition properly has the potential to move your art forward in a huge way. But don’t forget, your instructor can only teach you so much, the rest you have to learn. ☺