

Bonsai Tai Chi

The Blog



Have your say: email theblog@bonsaitaichi.eu

In tai chi there is a paranoia among students about the 'secrets' that the master is withholding. We hear much about 'The True Transmission' that is only given to worthy students. Many people will have had this reinforced by watching The Bruce Lee Story. Bruce was taken to task by the leaders of the Chinese community for passing on to westerners the secrets of their martial arts. Forced to fight their champion he is crippled (I think in the movie the opponent cheated but that's Hollywood for you it's not really a martial arts trait).

The question really is: "What is the 'true' transmission?" We are told, frequently, that there are no secrets but students still marvel at the master's abilities and wonder when he will show them how to do what he is doing. When an instructor tests a posture students dutifully stand there and get pushed over. The assumption, always, is that the instructor is applying some secret power that prevents them from making the move. It is true that some instructors – and some advanced students for that matter – will prevent someone they are working with from completing a move or even holding a static position such as peng (ward-off). But this is really to the detriment of the tester rather than the person being tested. It is an ego thing and to develop in tai chi requires a humble approach. One of the secrets, after all, is the ability to yield Chen Mann Ching said that you have to 'invest in loss'.

Stopping someone you are testing from making a move or holding the position is simple – you just change the direction of the pressure. If it is static and direct, apply slightly upward pressure. In a transitional move you can push up a shoulder or apply pressure to tilt the student out of line so that they lose balance. Of course you won't get away with either of these techniques with someone who knows what they are doing. They will sense what you are up to and react accordingly.

But the real reason students get pushed over by instructors is that when the instructor touches them they do not *expect* to be able to complete the move and so just stand there and get pushed. Not enough *yi* – intention – is the constant criticism. Tai chi is mind body and spirit working as one; we remember the body but forget to use our mind as well.

I think that the paranoia is a western thing. We expect to be taught, not to have to learn. It is how we are educated especially those of us of a 'certain age' and that applies to many, perhaps the majority, students of tai chi.

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I have written before that I was once told by a very senior instructor: “I can only teach you 50%, 60% if you are lucky, the rest you have to learn.” For me eight years of tai chi has been a cascade of dropping pennies. The more you work at tai chi and study the writings the more you will realise what it is about. According to one old-timer I spoke to, the secret that used to be kept back was the practice of chi-gung. This we use to develop our energy and concentrate it in the *dan-tien*. We all have chi, the thing we work towards is developing it and learning to use it in our practice. Tai chi is much more than a series of physical moves and, while at a physical level it can work as a self-defence system, the ability to use energy makes it devastating.

This, I think, is what is meant by the true transmission. But it is possible to teach people, from an early time in their practice, how to project and how to connect to other people and to take control of them. And once you know this you can work on it and develop the ability.

Of course I may be wrong and there may be a great secret that the master *is* holding back. I can though pass on the greatest secret of all:

PRACTICE. If you want to be as good as the master, train like he does: for two hours a day, for four hours a day, constantly. A class once a week may be fun but to be like the master you have to be as dedicated as he is. Even then you may not achieve your goal in a single lifetime. ☯

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