

Learning Curves

Learning tai chi can be a long and complicated business. And it is one that never ends as long as you remain a practitioner. There are some distinct learning stages:

● You first of all need to know the tai chi movements

This is a biggie. Everything comes from the 'form'. Many people, even after years of practice, think that the form *is* tai chi. Frequently teachers – even 'masters' – focus entirely on this aspect. For people who practise – and teach – tai chi simply as exercise it *is* an end in itself. Beginners struggle to remember where their hands should be and how to get to the next position. Teachers come along and adjust students' fingers, adding to the problem. Really, moving through the positions is as, if not more, important.

And, really, the form is just the beginning. Just the first layer in a marvellous multi layered cake.

● One day you get up, go through the form and wonder what all the fuss is about

One thing about learning the form, which sounds too obvious, is that it does respond to practise. One of the 'classics' says: 'One day's effort results in one day's benefit.' I am paraphrasing a bit but I am sure that you get the idea. It is something that is hard to explain and it is, perhaps, just a feeling on my part, but whilst anything that you practise will make you better at at, whatever it is, tai chi gets inside of you, your body seems to take over and do it for you. A student once said to me: "When I practise regularly I feel like I am living in my body not my head."

So the next stage is to learn a bit about the various positions and their applications. This where getting your hands sorted out does pay off. You also learn about 'weighting'; where your weight should be in relation to you feet.

In the beginning we talk about weight distribution being 70/30 i.e. 70% of your weight is on your dominant foot. (this will be front or back depending on what you are doing.) Ultimately it will need to be 100/0. A terrifying prospect for many people but, if you think about it, this is exactly your weight distribution when you walk!

Getting weight distribution right is harder than you might think. You go into, perhaps, 'brush-knee-and-push'. Because you are focused on your front leg you might think that you are correctly weighted. Then along comes an instructor and pushes you over. (I know, it happened to me!)

This where *you* learn to take control of your body and to feel what it is doing and where it is positioned instead of letting your mind control what you are doing. I know, you *are* your mind; or perhaps your mind *is* you. Well it is not but we will get back to that later.