

Notes on Tai Chi as a Practice

by

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The following discussion is to provoke your thinking on this matter. It is not meant to be a complete discourse on this matter or even provide all of my thoughts.

The idea of looking at Tai Chi as a “Practice” came to me on my cross-country drive from Virginia to California this past January. I had grabbed an assortment of old new-age cassette tapes of Linda’s that I found at her house: from Ram Dass to Bon Buddhists. The words of Lama Sogal Rinpoche, a Bon (Tibetan) Buddhist got me thinking. Here are his words on people saying they like themselves.

“When they say they like themselves, actually they don’t really know exactly what themselves are. So when I say make friends with oneself, is to really go deeper into yourself, which is what is presented in the practice of meditation; for instance, in the training of the mind in order for instance to develop compassion, first for oneself. “

He later adds, “... one becomes functional, one becomes serviceable, one becomes actually useful, in tune with and so with that a certain calmness, peace of mind, and mindfulness which is a kind of position of seeing great calmness, clarity begins to dawn... where you begin to see things very clearly, almost crispy clear.... “

“In that what you really discover is yourself, without the extra, the ego, and you begin to really find a kind of a joy, a friend, there, and when you are more in touch with this then you begin to kind of know yourself...It is more of a *direct experience of yourself*, (emphasis added) that you know yourself.

So in Buddhism: if you follow THE practice (although THE practice can be somewhat different between different schools of Buddhism) they suggest a person can work hard and become enlightened or self-aware/awakened. In fact, in other parts of his talk, Lama Sogal Rinpoche equates self-knowledge with awakening and enlightenment.

Back in California I was looking at Alan Watts 1957 book, “*The Way of Zen*.” It is interesting that the first chapter is called “The Philosophy of the Tao”. In this chapter he states, “For Taoism concerns itself with unconventional knowledge, with the *understanding of life directly*, (emphasis added) instead of the abstract, linear terms of representational thinking.”

The thoughts presented above and others struck a chord in me, as for many years, my interpretation of the value of Tai Chi Chuan is the gaining of self-knowledge/self-awareness through direct experience.

Thus the question came to mind, “Is Tai Chi a path to enlightenment?”

Of course, this begs the question, “What is enlightenment?”

The term “enlightenment” may be a loaded term for many. The OED defines this in the Buddhist sense as “The state of spiritual insight or awareness which frees a person from the cycle of suffering and rebirth;= Nirvana... However, the term *awakened* may connect with many. A slightly different way to look at this was conveyed to me by a friend, who after hearing some Mr. Lui stories commented that Mr. Lui sounded like a very “evolved” individual.

Thus the question might be put, “Is Tai Chi a way to become more evolved?” Or we can choose the perspective of Thich Naht Hahn and ask, Is Tai Chi a way to become more mindful?

Taking a small step back, if we wish to address Tai Chi as a practice perhaps it is best to start out with defining what we mean by practice. My working definition of a practice is a daily routine/ritual that endeavors to improve a person in a holistic sense. That is, its purpose is to improve the whole person; what is commonly referred to as in spirit, mind, and body, all aspects of being a human being.

One important component of this is the daily aspect of a practice. There seems to be something significant about doing something every day.

So we know people have yoga practices, the Buddhists have meditation practices. Taoism is somewhat unique as there is no practice attached to it. The Tao Te Ching tells us the characteristics of a sage, but there are no instructions on how to reach this way of being. This stands in stark contrast to the hundreds if not thousands of Buddhists documents telling one what to do and how to do it.

However, some hundreds of years after Lao Tse, Tai Chi Chuan came into being: A Way of moving that embodies the concepts of Taoism. And while it is quite possible to be a Taoist without Tai Chi, it certainly seems easier with Tai Chi.

So let us in this context, think of Tai Chi Chuan as a daily ritual/routine to improve a person holistically. When looking at a self-sensing person, holistically, we realize that smooth, relaxed, self-aware, centered movements must influence our thinking, our being. Our mental state cannot help but be more relaxed, centered, and self-aware.

To parrot Lama Sogal Rinpoche, “In this, what you can really discover is yourself, without the extra, the ego, and you begin to really find a kind of a joy, a friend there; and when you are more in touch that then you begin to know yourself.”

(How can we not be reminded of Mr. Lui saying, “Smash your ego to mashed potatoes.”)

It is the *direct experience* of yourself, which allows you to know yourself.

When one looks at Tai Chi websites, there is typically no mention of using Tai Chi to become enlightened, or let me put it this way, this is not a main advertising point. When I look at class and workshop announcements of Mr. Lui's, I never see the words enlightenment, self-awareness, or awakening; just that it's healthy. This may not be surprising when we recall that Tai Chi, like Taoism, is sneaky.

What did Mr. Lui say? "N.P.N.B." How many times did those of us who studied with him hear this and yet Mr. Lui never suggested that one might become self-aware or enlightened. He talked about moving Chi and Yee. These were things that made life better, healthier, on the Tao. He never said being on the Tao was a form of enlightenment or self-awareness, but perhaps he inferred it when he said things like,

*"If you treat Tai Chi like a motel, you will be treated like a guest,
If you treat it like home, you will be embraced like family."*

And

"You can get the Tai Chi form in the bargain basement at Macy's. If you practice Tai Chi and it doesn't change you as a person you are wasting your time."

Mr. Lui in the best Taoist tradition was indirect. But his last statement suggests that there are different ways to do Tai Chi Chuan. I suggest that practitioners of Tai Chi must pay attention; must be aware of how they are moving; must be learning about themselves. Thus they become mindful.

Mr. Lui gives us this concept, N.P.N.B., that Tai Chi can become a practice. Recent studies show Tai Chi changes brain waves, not unlike what meditation does; something that probably comes as no surprise to most long-term practitioners.

Here is an aspect of Tai Chi that I love. Recall the saying:

One who knows Tai Chi is above who doesn't know Tai Chi
One who loves Tai Chi is above one who knows Tai Chi
One who practices Tai Chi is above one who loves Tai Chi
But only one who derives joy from Tai Chi will continue to practice Tai Chi.

This brings us to a divide between the joy of Taoism and Tai Chi and the bitterness of the Buddhist view of life, a view of life as suffering. One does not suffer in doing Tai Chi. But to many the idea that one can learn through joy seems upside down. And yet every educator will tell you that pain and suffering interfere with learning.

If one practices Tai Chi daily, and does so with the correct mental state, paying attention of oneself, then after years of practice things begin to change. You change. You are more relaxed, both mentally and physically. You are more alert.

And there are other changes, but I don't know what they are. I know what happened to me, but what may happen to others? Well only the others know, only you know what happens to you. I would guess that one would get what one needs. For example if you are too Yang you become more Yin.

Do these changes just magically happen? No they happen as you become more aware of yourself, more mindful of your actions. You can't become more Yin until you sense your over-Yangness. One does not slow down unless one knows how fast one is going. In practicing Tai Chi one learns about oneself. As Lama Sogal Rinpoche stated, it starts with self-awareness, self-compassion, or as I think of it: self-learning.

These are some of my thoughts, based on my experience. What is your experience? Do you see Tai Chi in this way or is it just a physical exercise? Do you see it as meditation? If you have you done sitting meditation, how does it compare?

Looking forward to hearing your thoughts.