

HANDOUT

The 42nd Annual Tai Chi Friends Reunion
June 12-16, 2022 – The Westerbeke Ranch, Sonoma, CA
Class: Formless Form, Tuesday June 14th from 9-9:50 am
Prepared by Nancy Hoffman

*First we recognize Tai Chi, then we learn Tai Chi,
then we digest Tai Chi, then we spiritualize Tai Chi.*



General Conception of Form: Plato based his philosophy on the ideal of perfect Form, that each thing has a perfected Form that underpins the visible fact of any given Form, for instance a chair. *That other sort of knowledge which reason herself attains ... as steps and points of departure in a world which is above hypotheses, in order that she may soar beyond them to the first principle as a whole.* (Plato's Republic, end of Book VI). Here is Form envisioned as first principle.

Form is useful only in terms of the space that it creates and we tolerate it to realize these spaces. The classic examples are the form of walls of a house which are only useful in creating the space for living within the walls; the form of a bowl is only useful in the empty space it creates to hold the warm vegetable broth as we have all read at some time or another in Laotse:

Thirty spokes unite around the nave;
From their not being (loss of their individuality)
Arises the utility of the wheel.
Mold clay into a vessel;
From its not-being (in the vessel's hollow)
Arises the utility of the vessel.
Cut out doors and windows in the house (-wall),
From their not-being (empty space) arises the utility
of the house.

Book 11; The Wisdom of Laotse, Modern Library Ed. 1948, p. 87

The Form in Tai Chi: This is an interesting conundrum in our contemplation of Form as we consider it in Tai Chi. What is that space that a Form of Tai Chi creates?

Formlessness: Why should mystics have all the corner on psychic space. Let's start there. Tai Chi energy, as the Form vanishes, translates into a space of "Tai Chi Harmony Oneness." It is here in our practice that we have access to a special space, a nothingness that is actually a great something, the *Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is* (from *The Snow Man* by Wallace Stevens).

The Concrete Nature of the Tai Chi Form: We tolerate that heavy lift of learning Tai Chi Forms for the pleasure of the physical movement, the rhythm in it, the beauty of it, the health giving aspects, the energy we find there. Many of us here have left that “brick and mortar” aspect of our Forms pretty far behind already, but in this class we remind ourselves of “the putting together” of the Forms we know. For a reminder of that “early learning stage” and absorption of the Tai Chi Forms we practice, I found Barbara Alderson’s teaching method of putting together 2-3 small movements to repeat and study very interesting for focusing on technique. Here, we come to Form new, not the repeated Form sequences we already know. In her method, this was a way of experiencing the mind working to accommodate the new, *the to-be-learned*, and the memorization aspect.

The movements: Elbow strokes per Jim Bush twice each side facing N followed by Grasp Birds Tail to two corners. Back to N and repeat JB Elbow strokes twice each side followed by Grasp Bird’s Tail to each side. Repeat three times.

The Absorbed Form: Once the Form is absorbed, our experience of it changes for the practice of Forms we know well. Our mind hovers over these movements somewhat differently and the “brick and mortar” struggle is no longer the critical experience, though the mind checks back over the Form as structure from time to time. Observe this hovering over the known Tai Chi Form, as compared to the Concrete Form you didn’t know here at first.

The movements: Three familiar moves in customary sequence from the PHD: row the boat, rubber band stretch, Grasp Bird’s tail with elbow strokes. Repeat three times.

Formless Form: Once you know any Form well, there are opportunities to escape the Form. The heart follows the eyes and emphasizing the open eyed-ness at the inhale and the softening of the eyes at the exhale provides a step toward releasing oneself from attachment to the Form itself.

The movements: Revisit Elbow Strokes per Jim Bush / Elbow strokes with deep breathing and eye engagement. The Grasp Birds Tail to two corners. Then JB Elbow strokes to each side followed by Grasp Bird’s Tail to each side

Letting go of the Form: As in for other meditational practices, this is precisely that, *a practice*. The idea of *seeing beyond* in order to practice tolerance for formlessness.

The movements:

Continuous Punch: 1) eyes alive 2) fish in the arms 3) letting go of underlying formal form in favor of “seeing” the natural moves of fish in a school, in the sea, free

Grasp Bird’s Tail: 1) eyes alive 2) coil or spring 3) letting go of underlying formal form in favor of “feeling” the up and down bounce of a coil or spring

Deep Joy Pull: 1) eyes alive 2) retreating wave 3) letting go of underlying formal form in favor of “hearing” the sound of the wave going out to sea

Fair Maiden: 1) eyes alive 2) stroking the wild horses’ manes 3) letting go of underlying formal form in favor of “wheeling” with the four horses to each direction

Relaxation & Imagination: In course of practicing PhD, invitation to call out imagined sequences overtop of the known Form, playing Tai Chi, and practicing toleration of formlessness, flying without a net to see where this flight will go.