

Slow Dancing

43rd Annual Cloud Hands Tai Chi Reunion

When learning tai chi, the form is taught and postures are emphasized along with the basic principles. We say first, “learn the rules,” second, “be familiar with the rules,” third, “digest the rules,” and finally, “spiritualize the rules.” This process can be compared to what Don Miguel Ruiz calls the Four Agreements as defined and explored in his book of the same name. First we “show up,” then “pay attention,” “speak with integrity,” and finally, “let go.” I have observed in my own practice and in observing others, especially those of us who have practiced for a long time, that moving through the form is not unlike taking a comfortable seat on a well-worn sofa. We like the familiarity of the furniture, our body settles into the form and we are relaxed, we know what we’re doing, we know this form. We are present, but are we really? Are we staying open, are we learning anything? Sure, we could learn more forms, but the deeper learning, the spiritualizing, that place between heaven and earth, are we receiving all of that?

If we allow our breathing to be as dynamic as our transitions, we will automatically slow down and we’re better able to “spiritualize the rules;” we’ll have a more beneficial tai chi practice, whatever form we’re practicing. During part of this class, we will concentrate on various ways of deepening our breath.

If we pay attention to breath as we move a little to the left, before we move to the right, carefully and wholeheartedly, we will receive more chi from Row the Boat. If coordinated with the breath, our hips move and stay open when we do a Pull Down, the full complexity of the move is honored and realized and automatically we’re slowing down. We cease to be simply lifting the foot. The body must be fully engaged while we are breathing the transition. Then begins the contrast with what is yin, what is yang in the movement. Using our prop, we begin to identify this is the yin (inhaling) part of the movement, so that the yang (exhaling) part of the movement to follow will be fully appreciated.

Eleven

Thirty spokes share the wheel’s hub;
It is the center hole that makes it useful.
Shape clay into a vessel;
It is the space within that makes it useful.
Cut doors and windows for a room;
It is the holes which make it useful.
Therefore profit comes from what is there;
Usefulness from what is not there.”

--Tao Te Ching, translation by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English

When we fully practice the transitions as well as the major movements in our tai chi practice, we simultaneously slow down and gain more chi. As in life, it is during the transitional (hand off) moments that the attitude, the integrity is set before the final letting go, and/or the final receiving can take place. We let go of the comfort of that old couch and move into a new realm of wonder and magic that is our tai chi.

Now bring our attention to the body and limb coordination.

The principle of ‘three points in line’ should be observed. One’s shoulders should coordinate with one’s inner thighs, one’s elbows with one’s knees, and one’s hands with one’s feet. This is called the ‘three external coordinations.’

-- H. H. Lui

For example, as we breathe and sink then rise shifting the weight, moving yin to yang in Row the Boat, we coordinate the weight shift to the front leg with the spiraling arms and breathing hands all reaching their forwardmost position as the exhale completes. This coordination combined with the breath and the centrality of the center bring us into a fuller expression of the movement, naturally slowing the move.

We string it all together in practice, practice, practice. We bring our attention to these elements in movements that illustrate these components as we move from the waist and coordinate our appendages with that movement.

“Tai chi is rooted in the feet, developed in the thighs, directed by the waist and expressed through the fingertips.” –Tai Chi Classics

Between Heaven and Earth

Between Heaven and Earth, there exists a life force or energy called chi, which is somewhat like steam to a steamboat. Chi serves to make things move or bounce. It is the chi that makes the tai chi movement light and nimble, change and grow. It is the chi that makes a person feel the sensational fulfillment in doing the exercise. With the absence of chi, there can be no tai chi chuan. Chi fills the Universe. The Universe is chi. Thus it should surprise no one to learn that there is chi flowing through the human mind and body. The better the communication and harmonious oneness a person has with the Universe, the more chi with which he is gifted. Tai chi is an art of conserving chi. The secret of tai chi is to harmonize ourselves with the movement of the Universe and bring ourselves into accord with the Universe itself. Thus tai chi is the work of giving life to all beings and not struggling or striving with each other. There is no discord in love.

-H.H. Lui

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