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***EXPLORING TAI CHI***  
*CONTEMPORARY VIEWS ON AN ANCIENT ART*

**JOHN LOUPOS**

# ***EXPLORING TAI CHI***

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Contemporary Views on an Ancient Art

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## Foreword

Welcome to this book. Whether you are new to taijiquan (t'ai chi ch'üan), a beginner, an experienced player, or a teacher, there is something here that will make your stay worthwhile. Do not be deceived by its appearance: the author has not so much written a book as he has created a space in which we may meet him for practice and discussion. However you visualize the setting—a tree-shaded lawn, a rooftop, a modern studio, a gymnasium, a beach, a courtyard off a busy street, or a gilt-raftered, red-columned pavilion—the author invites us in to share in the give and take of energy, the exchange of ideas and inspiration, as to an exercise of joining hands (tui shou). His open-mindedness is refreshing, his enthusiasm is infectious, his love of taijiquan, his devotion to teaching and to his students is clear, his insight often penetrating. I find myself agreeing with much, diverging some, but always stimulated and often, delighted.

I like this book for three reasons. First, because its author is not posing as an authority, but as an explorer. He is not espousing set ideas so much as playing with fluid ones. As we read, we feel that he is learning, too. Second, he speaks to several audiences within the community of taijiquan players. This book is written for beginners, but on the same page and often in the same sentence, he is speaking to advanced players and teachers. This scope invites the beginner to imagine what it might be like to have played taijiquan for many years, and invites the experienced player to become once again and continually, a beginner. And third, I like this book because in his exploration the author touches on many ideas and methods, some of which will push out the boundaries of thought and practice for any player.

Taijiquan is an exercise of discernment. Expertise consists in being able to differentiate between subtly different situations and conditions. The character “quan” is said to come from a phonetic showing two hands separating one thing from another, as one picks through dried beans to cull out stones. Specifically, we gradually learn to distinguish tension and relaxation, resistance and surrender, light and heavy, open and closed: in short, between the extremes of yin and yang to which the characters for “taiji” refer. The question, for the beginner and expert alike, is how best to practice this? It is axiomatic in taijiquan that mere repetition of choreography is insufficient. What can we do to obtain the greatest benefit? In our search for answers, this book has much to offer.

Perhaps the most intriguing, even provocative aspect of this book is the author's advocacy of perineal breathing. In Chapters 6 and 8 he relates activation of the sphincters or ring muscles both to the production of fa jin (energy issued for martial purposes) and to health and healing, citing his own training in qigong and the work of Paula Garbourg, author of *The Secret of the Ring Muscles*. I also have read her book, and for me as for John, it served only as further confirmation of an approach with which I was already familiar: in my case, through the research and example of my teacher, Master Jou, Tsung Hwa.



Master Jou healed various ailments, including varicose veins and poor eyesight, by matching a bellows-like movement of his dantian to other parts of his body. He referred to this movement as pre-birth breathing or “breathing without breathing” (wu xi zhi xi), and wrote about it in the seventh edition of *The Dao of Taijiquan: Way to Rejuvenation*. He used an ancient training exercise to demonstrate the energy cultivated through this method: he would lie on his back and, with his abdomen, toss a coin several feet in the air. In his memory, we now award the Jou Medallion to any taiji player of two or more years who can launch a penny one foot from the dantian. His taiji forms were driven by dantian movement, and it became a constant practice for him, applied throughout daily life. Because I witnessed the results of his discipline and can testify to his increasingly impressive ability in push-hands, I add my voice to John’s in emphasizing the importance of subtle auxiliary exercise in taiji practice.

Any serious exploration of taijiquan must inevitably take us where this present book and its author are leading. Taijiquan is a form of centered movement involving the entire body, and employing the emotions, the imagination, the will. But the key is the center. True progress begins when we initiate movement there, sustain this movement in areas proximal, such as the diaphragm, kidney region, and perineum, and ultimately move all peripheral parts by and in consonance with the simple resonance of the center. The proof of our success is the energy and attitude with which we move through each day. So, though other chapters are also absorbing, be sure before you put this book down to read the “family stories,” and contemplate your answer to the author’s question “Are you living your t’ai chi?” in Chapter 10.

I am out in the dark before dawn. I walk up the rough farm road, my T’ai Chi shoes scrunching on gravel, and turn into a small field. The old barn to the north is a looming shadow. The grass is slightly wet. I stand. Normally, taiji practice is a solo affair, hemmed in by the frenetic pace of daily life. But here, as the pale light obscures the stars, I become aware of others, standing still or moving quietly through routines: one by the old orchard, another by the pond, a few in the larger field beyond the willows. For at T’ai Chi Farm, a place—now gone—that fostered learning and sharing between schools and styles, everyone was a taiji player: we were not oddities because of it, but were members of a community of enthusiasts, our love and dedication to the art a common bond. Now, like the spirits of the heroes of Liangshan Marsh, we are scattered to the eight directions. Can we recapture and nourish this kinship? Because taijiquan is passed from teacher to student, often with an inbred, exclusive kind of loyalty, the force that separates us is strong. But voices like that of John Loupos remind us that though taiji is principally an individual journey, companionship along the road is to be treasured.

Jay Dunbar, Ph.D.

Sponsor of the Jou, Tsung Hwa Memorial Dantian Challenge

Director of the Magic Tortoise Taijiquan School

[www.magictortoise.com](http://www.magictortoise.com)

## Preface

T'ai Chi, as a spiritual discipline with roots planted firmly in esoteric Daoism (Taoism), remains somewhat enigmatic for many people here in the West. One might reasonably anticipate that the veil of mysticism that shrouds this practice would lift somewhat with indoctrination into the art. The reality, however, is that many aspects of T'ai Chi remain elusive even for those engaged in its regular practice. For many practitioners T'ai Chi remains something they merely 'do', as opposed to its becoming an indelible part of who they are. T'ai Chi is, on the one hand, a tool for personal development. On the other, it is a metaphor for living life in the clearest, most efficient, and most deliberate way. For myself, the dynamics of writing about T'ai Chi and of maintaining an active personal practice as well as a busy teaching practice have been closely interwoven.

What keeps these dynamics so closely interwoven is my deliberate attention to T'ai Chi as an integral part of my own process. The theme of 'process', as integral to T'ai Chi, defined my first book. In keeping with this ideology of *process orientation*, I can attest that the task of writing about T'ai Chi has been both challenging and rewarding. The extent to which I have committed myself in print to my own thoughts and beliefs, not to mention the efficacy of my teaching method, has engendered a good bit of soul searching and critical review. More than once, I found myself reevaluating long held premises in order to take nothing for granted.

Typical reader feedback to my first book included (the hoped for) appreciation of 'what' I had to say. Just as significantly, readers consistently expressed their appreciation of 'how' I went about saying it—plainly and clearly enough to shed that veil of mysticism. Accordingly, the information contained therein, and hopefully herein, can be perceived as more meaningful, bringing T'ai Chi, as a personal development resource, more within the reader's grasp. It is, after all, my intent in writing to accomplish just that.

On a final note, as in my earlier book, I use the terms T'ai Chi and T'ai Chi Chuan casually and interchangeably throughout this text, unless otherwise noted.



## Romanization of Chinese Words

This book uses the Wade-Giles romanization system of Chinese to English. There are two other systems currently in use. These are the Pinyin and the Yale systems. The cover of this book presents the Wade-Giles romanization without apostrophes in order to simplify cataloging

Some common conversions:

Wade-Giles	Pinyin	Pronunciation
Ch'i	Qi	chē
Ch'i Kung	Qigong	chē kǔng
Chin Na	Qin Na	chǐn nǎ
Kung Fu	Gongfu	gōng foo
T'ai Chi Ch'uan	Taijiquan	tī jē chüén

For more information, please refer to *The People's Republic of China: Administrative Atlas*, *The Reform of the Chinese Written Language*, or a contemporary manual of style.



## Acknowledgements

As with my earlier book, I am indebted to a number of individuals whose help and support contributed to the completion of this current work.

I wish to express my appreciation to my T'ai Chi colleagues Jaime Cobb, D.C., D.O.M., and Danny Quaranto, OMD, for consulting on matters of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

I also want to thank Jane Cicchetti, my first teacher in Classical Homeopathy, as well as Dr. Paul Herscu, founder of the New England School of Homeopathy, with whom I subsequently studied.

I want to express my appreciation to my student and teaching assistant Dan Bates whose role at my school made it possible for me write at times that might otherwise have been inopportune.

I also wish to extend my thanks to certain individuals whose help in completing this book has, once again, been of immeasurable value: Susan Bullowa, my ever helpful editor at YMAA, Gretchen Sassone whose constructive criticism has again contributed to lucid text, and also my illustrators, Julie Nolen Williams and Vasiliki Belezos. Special thanks to Dr. Jay Dunbar for his foreword.

I am also indebted to those T'ai Chi students who contributed to my chapter on T'ai Chi and Family Dynamics.

Finally, I wish to express my most heartfelt appreciation to Master Wei Lun Huang for his warm friendship and unerring guidance as a teacher along my path.



# Your Course of Study

## THE BASICS

### Be A Good T'ai Chi Student

If you are interested in learning about T'ai Chi with the idea that you may eventually undertake a study of this discipline for yourself, I can think of no better place to begin than with some discussion of how to be a good student. No, I do not think of a good student as someone who does what they are told and prioritizes their studies above all else. My definition of a good student is, first, someone who recognizes that the learning process is a two-way street to be navigated in collaboration with one's teacher and, second, someone who is willing to take initiative and assume responsibility in pursuing a respectful approach to that learning process.

### Getting Started

Assuming that you have made the decision to undertake a study of T'ai Chi, or that you may have even actually gone so far as to settle on a possible school or teacher, how might you now proceed? In all likelihood, there will be a range of factors that must be taken into consideration. Some of your considerations may be predetermined by inelastic factors such as limits on traveling distance, expenses, and scheduling. These aside, the single most important extrinsic variable in your T'ai Chi education will be your teacher, this much more so than any consideration given to which style or system of T'ai Chi you ultimately pursue. Your teacher will influence almost every aspect of your training. Not the least of this will be your teacher's influence on the essential meaning and value that T'ai Chi may eventually come to have for you in your life. My first advice for you is to exercise your most thoughtful discrimination in selecting the T'ai Chi teacher with whom you commit to study. Weigh this decision carefully, just as you would if you were choosing a health care provider or a financial advisor.

### Choosing a Teacher

Back in the '60s or '70s, selecting a teacher was easy. There were so few teachers that there was not that much choice in the matter. T'ai Chi teachers were few enough and far enough between that unless you lived in a major city, you not only had to, but were usually able to satisfactorily settle for whomever was available. Thankfully, most of those teachers who were available were closely linked to their Asian heritage and hence not far removed from 'the source'. For most teachers, back



then, a basic level of credibility (at least) was therefore likely if not guaranteed. I had the poor fortune to choose as a first teacher someone who was merely adequate to the task. But, in the long run, even that experience proved valuable to me.

Nowadays, teachers are often generations removed from any direct link to their T'ai Chi roots in China. This does not necessarily mean that the quality of teaching has suffered. Quite the contrary, some of the best T'ai Chi teachers I know are non-Asians. This less direct linkage to the past may mean that the cultural orientation of whomever you opt for as your T'ai Chi instructor may be less grounded in traditional Asian values or philosophy. For some students this may be an issue, for others it may not.

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**I** recommend that potential students rely both on what they think about a teacher as well as what they intuitively feel in deciding if a teacher or a program is right for them.

---

### **Be a Good Consumer**

Exercise caution that you not allow yourself to be so taken with your initial impression of any teacher that you fail to be a good consumer. Once you are more deeply involved with your studies, your teacher may very well come to be more than just someone who shows you how to move slowly. With any luck, you will find a teacher who presents T'ai Chi as a metaphor for living your life in the best possible way. Should that happen, your instructor may even come to be someone whom you exalt as a mentor or guide in your life. Now is the time then, as you embark on this journey, for you to attend dispassionately to the hard-nosed details of enrollment, which are adjunct to any course of study.

Concerns you might consider include:

1. How are your teacher's communication skills?
2. Do you feel some sense or possibility of rapport?
3. What are the costs and tuition arrangements?
4. What, if any, are the terms of your commitment to your studies?
5. If problems or conflicts should arise, how might they be resolved?
6. How, exactly, are your needs going to be met once you are in class?
7. Is the teacher and the school well established and likely to be around for a while?

There may be other concerns particular to your situation. The sooner you can identify them and bring them up for discussion with your teacher the less likely they are to cause difficult or irreparable misunderstandings at some later time.

### **What Makes a Good Teacher?**

Being a skilled, or even master level practitioner of T'ai Chi Chuan, may have little bearing on a teacher's ability to convey his or her knowledge effectively and

meaningfully to others. I'm fond of telling my assistant instructors who aspire to become teachers themselves that any teacher who operates a successful teaching facility must be accomplished in three ways.

First and foremost, a teacher must be skilled, if not expert, at the art and science of T'ai Chi Chuan. T'ai Chi is not like other 'sports' at which someone can be a good coach without actually having been a skilled participant. In T'ai Chi, good teaching skills are rooted in practical experience.

Second, in order to convey that hard-earned knowledge, a teacher must have good communication skills. These are not necessarily the same thing as good language skills. Good communication skills entail an ability to sense and respond to whatever the needs of the students (which can be vast and variable) are and to be able to empathize with students when appropriate. A good teacher must also be flexible in his or her ability to adapt his teaching style to a range of different learning modalities or external circumstances. Communication through the use of spoken words is but one of many ways in which a teacher can educate students in the intricacies of T'ai Chi Chuan.

Third, an instructor must be able to effectively manage the business end of teaching. If you do not think this is important to your interests as a student, you have not experienced the frustration of committing to a course of study only to have the school fail due to mismanagement. The discipline of T'ai Chi has very much itself to do with self-management. How your school manages its business can serve as a model for how you manage yourself. Remember, a good teacher is only a teacher at all as long as there are students to teach.

## **ONCE YOU'RE IN CLASS**

### **Attending Classes**

Once you have gotten yourself settled into a program, it is probably a good idea to give some thought to how to make the most of your studies. The frequency with which you attend class for instruction will naturally be a determining factor in the progress you make. Some of my students are in for class once a week, and others never miss a session, attending up to four or five group classes during the week, and then scheduling private lesson time with me over the weekend.

It is true that a greater frequency of attendance usually translates into faster progress at your studies, but there may be a limit to this as well. It is not always the case that faster progress means better progress. Just as is the case with other personal growth venues, such as psychotherapy or even just learning from one's life experiences, some processes are best integrated when they unfold at a pace that is digestible to all the many aspects of yourself. Your body, your mind, and your emotional or your spiritual self may each need to process your experience of T'ai Chi in its own way and in its own time. Enthusiasm aside, you will get the most real progress from your classes if you respect this process. Some of the students with

whom I work, and for whom attendance is infrequent, actually make what appears to be good progress in terms of integrating T'ai Chi meaningfully into their lives. These are usually individuals who are already gifted with, or who have already developed, some sense of continuity around their life experiences. That said, as a rule, two or three classes per week makes for a good pace when starting out at T'ai Chi. Regardless of how many classes you are able attend, just do the best you can. Any classes are better than no classes.

### Initial Frustrations

Your frequency of class attendance will certainly be one variable, of many, in how quickly you can expect to learn. Less of a variable and more of a given is that T'ai Chi is inherently slow, both in the execution of its moves and the pace at which the totality of its lessons are best absorbed. T'ai Chi can initially seem both overwhelming in its possibilities and trying in how slowly those possibilities become available for absorption and integration. Despite the prospect of T'ai Chi as an exciting new resource in your life, it is during these initial stages of learning the T'ai Chi form that your pace of learning may seem least expeditious.

This will especially be the case for those newer students who tend to be more goal oriented or predisposed to linear learning approaches. The slow pace of learning T'ai Chi over your first weeks of study may actually prove to be a little frustrating as there may be very little tangible material for you to practice outside of class. Different teachers will vary in how quickly they expose new students to new material. Even so, the learning of T'ai Chi will probably represent a slower acquisition of tangible information (in terms of quantity) than most people are accustomed to. As a rule, other learning venues (other than T'ai Chi) place a high value on rapid absorption of whatever material is being taught. Students at other venues are regarded as bright and promising, or as 'quick studies,' if they can pick things up right off. In T'ai Chi there is little correlation between an accelerated acquisition of movement sequences and any genuine grasp of T'ai Chi's underlying principles. Learning the moves to your form faster rather than slower does not assure that you will 'get' T'ai Chi's more internal and defining aspects any sooner. In fact, just the opposite may be the case as there can be an inverse correlation between learning fast and learning well.

The upshot is that newer students, perhaps for the first month or so, often find themselves with relatively little material (few moves) to practice outside of class. Whereas those students who are already skilled at T'ai Chi might be quite contented to practice the same move(s) over and over again (and because of their grasp of T'ai Chi principles be able to derive significant benefit from such a concentrated approach), newer students not yet attuned to T'ai Chi's internal subtleties may not perceive themselves to be deriving the same benefit. Neither will goal-oriented students who have only a few moves to practice likely find their continued repetition of those moves to feel especially gratifying, not until they are, eventually, able

to advance beyond T'ai Chi's more superficial expression. You might think of this as analogous to the piano novice who enters into his studies with visions of becoming an accomplished concert pianist, only to find himself grounded in reality from the onset by hours and weeks of tedious finger and chord exercises.

After you have learned a larger chunk of the moves making up the T'ai Chi form sequence, your practice of T'ai Chi will come to feel more palpable. In the meantime, students newer at T'ai Chi will do well to anticipate that the best they may be able to do for themselves in the interim is the T'ai Chi equivalent of those piano finger exercises, the true value of which only becomes apparent in later stages of training. Be prepared to practice however little you may have been taught over and over for best results. Discipline in this regard in your early stages will reap big dividends as you continue with your training.

### What to Expect in Class

All teachers have their own way of structuring their classes as well as their teaching approach. Many teachers have as a basis for this whatever teaching model they inherited from their own teacher. It is quite natural for one to teach in the manner one has been taught. It is common and even predictable that this is the case with teachers who are newer to the task. As teachers continue passing on their own knowledge, perhaps over a span measured in decades, they will be more inclined to evolve a uniqueness to their teaching method, albeit one that has threads reaching back to their past.

When I first began teaching T'ai Chi, I, like most other newer teachers, taught according to a 'formula.' Classes ran about an hour (which is one dynamic that has more or less endured over the years) and began with a prescribed warm-up routine. We then segued into form practice and perhaps saved the tail end of class maybe for some pushing hands practice or Ch'i Kung.

Nowadays my approach tends to be more spontaneous and eclectic. I sense where my own energy is. I sense where the class's energy is. Then, I proceed to teach, not so much from the perspective that I'm the teacher and they are the students, but more from the perspective that these folks are here to learn from me what I have to share with them. I'm their teacher, yes, but also their guide, above and beyond being just a teacher. As the 'teacher' of my students, I feel a great responsibility resting upon my shoulders, an accountability to impart my own knowledge in the best way possible for each student. As the 'guide' of those who study with me, I recognize that all students must ultimately determine their own path. It just so happens that my students and I share a path, as well as a process, and we are all here to learn the next lesson.

The upshot of this approach is that the actual curriculum in any given class, or from week to week, may vary widely according a fluid agenda. Sometimes this agenda may entail practice and repetition of the T'ai Chi form in its entirety. Other times one small part of one individual move may beg our attention at length, only

to give way to a similarly focused attention on another related small aspect of some different move. Sometimes our class theme may focus on certain T'ai Chi qualities—on posture, or energy work, or conditioning, or rooting, or on T'ai Chi's application in problem solving some of life's issues. Certainly, the depth and breadth of all that T'ai Chi is precludes attention to the whole of its many facets in any one class, or any one week for that matter. Students who are committed to learning T'ai Chi Chuan will get what they need when they need it, sooner or later, during any extended course of study.

One area where my own practice and teaching style has evolved conspicuously is in the realm of 'conditioning'. Whereas in the earlier stages of my (T'ai Chi) teaching career, conditioning as such was not explicitly emphasized, it now plays a defining role in my teaching method. During the initial warm-up phase of class, Ch'i Kung conditioning practices lend themselves as ideal complements to the practice of T'ai Chi. Ch'i Kung practices build strength and resilience in the body at a very deep level, and set a ready stage for rooting to the earth and moving energy during form practice.

This non-linear approach seems to work well in my class. There are many other approaches, which can work just as well in helping you to achieve proficiency at T'ai Chi.

#### Home Practice

*"How often should I practice?"* is one of the most common questions posed by newer students. To get the most out of your studies, you will need to put in some practice time outside of class. How much is enough, or too much? Frequency of practice is a matter of genuine concern to many students because:

1. People have limited time available and do not want to overcommit.
2. People have limited time available and do not want to undercommit.
3. People are goal oriented and want some sense of what kind of commitment is necessary in order to reach their goal.
4. People who are lacking in their ability to prioritize want to have a sense of structure organized externally for them.
5. People are uncertain about the best effort/reward ratio for a discipline such as T'ai Chi.
6. People who lack confidence in their ability need reinforcement.
7. People want to compare T'ai Chi against other exercise disciplines.
8. People want to gauge their actual level of practice against the standard set for them by their teacher.

And so on...

Determining the best frequency of practice depends on the student and should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. I would be remiss in my responsibilities as a teacher if I were to dictate, without regard for individual circumstances, how often my students were to practice their T'ai Chi. For example, if I were to advise some-

one that he or she must practice every day, I risk alienating those students for whom daily practice is:

- A. Not feasible (perhaps due to a multitude of other responsibilities), or
- B. Unlikely (some people are just not practice-at-home types), or
- C. Untimely (newer students are often ambivalent about the level of their commitment).

Many people seek out T'ai Chi as a way of reducing stress in their lives. Bearing this in mind, it would be in nobody's best interests for T'ai Chi to become one more stressful demand in the lives my students because of some arbitrary practice standard dictated by myself. Let's take a closer look at just the three impediments to home practice noted above.

- A. With regards to the issue of feasibility, life in this day and age is hardly simple. It is not realistic to expect that everyone can just put off their responsibilities such as jobs, family, school and so on to come study T'ai Chi all day, every day. There are practical demands on our time and our resources that must be met.

Part of the problem with modern life has to do with compartmentalization, which is the tendency to try to get organized by segregating the different parts of your life into what feels like smaller and more manageable pieces (see Figure 1-1). Being organized as you go

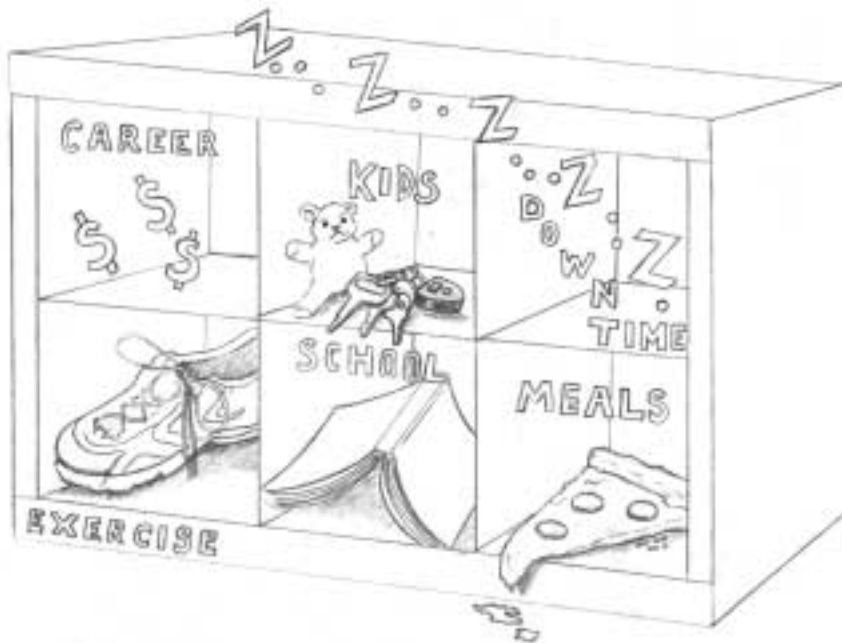


Figure 1-1. A typical compartmentalized life

through life is all well and good, but compartmentalization is really a coping mechanism as much as it is an organizational skill. When carried too far, compartmentalization becomes antithetical to any approach that is more integrative and which would leave us feeling more whole versus more segmented. Nevertheless, this is the way many people live their lives. Having your life organize you to the point that you feel unable to prioritize wellness time for yourself can, by itself, be stressful. Sometimes just getting to class feels like a major accomplishment, let alone putting in extra time to practice at home.

**B.** Some people are just unlikely to practice outside of class. Many newly enrolled students disclose that they have tried solo fitness regimes, such as running or working out at a gym, and found them to be uninspiring (see Figure 1-2). But, put these people in a group of similarly inclined individuals with a teacher to lead and inspire them and suddenly they are motivated and happy participants (see Figure 1-3). They may never practice at home, but they will stay motivated as long as they are in class.



Figure 1-2. Some folks are not cut out for the gym...



Figure 1-3. ...but may be more enthused in a group.

C. A third consideration is 'timeliness'. By that I mean T'ai Chi will hold a variable significance for those who practice it, depending on how far along students are in both the timeline of their training and, even more importantly, where they are in their lives (see Figure 1-4). Many students I've worked with started off slowly with their T'ai Chi, testing the waters so to speak, only to fortify their resolve and accelerate their training over time as their practice came to take on greater meaning in their lives. This happens only if and when the student is ready for it to happen, and not before.

Having noted these impediments to home practice, we must also recognize that there is an effort/reward ratio. Practice begets improvement. If you do not make the effort at home to practice what you have learned in class, then you can hardly expect to reap any substantial rewards. Somehow a balance must be struck. There is, therefore, something to be said for submitting yourself to the training standards inherent in the discipline, which may be considerable. When students ask about my recommendations for home practice, I try to share my thoughts along these lines of reasoning with them as one more means of engaging them in setting their own goals and parameters around practice.

Finally, my biggest reservation in telling students how often they should practice centers around the use of the word 'should'. The only thing I think people 'should' do is pay attention to and trust their own inner process (even though sometimes that process may tell you what you 'should' do). Mostly, I don't care much for this word 'should' because of its tacit moral implications. *Should* is one of those words that sounds somehow antithetical to the whole idea of process. If people fail to do what they *should* do, it may result in self-effacement or guilt, and it shouldn't.

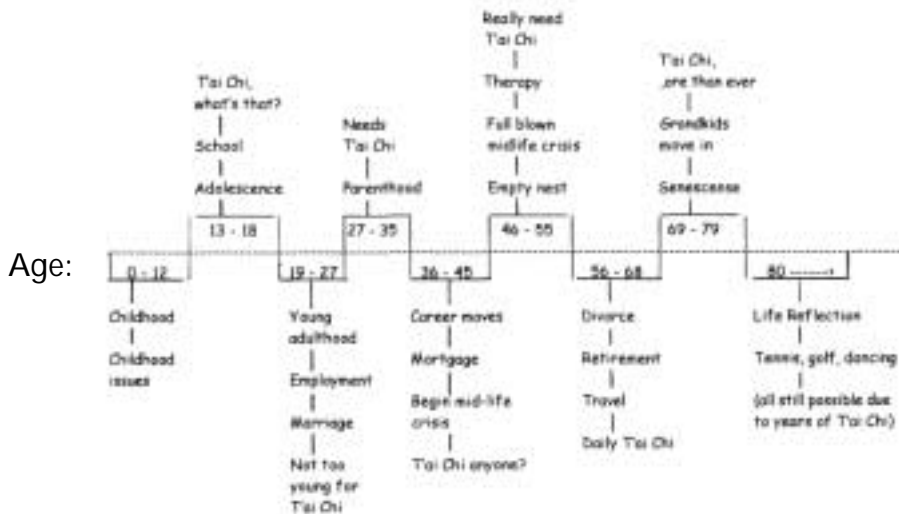


Figure 1-4.



If I dictate a practice standard for students who subsequently fail to measure up to that standard, then their experience becomes one of failure rather than one of accomplishment. Rather than *shoulding* your way through life, you might try to put more credence in cause and effect and try, whenever possible, to frame or reframe the guidance you receive in that vein, i.e., *“If I do not practice I will not improve my skill level. Now I must decide what I’m prepared to do and act on it.”* In this way, students are encouraged non-judgmentally to assume responsibility for their own level of commitment.

### Should I Practice Wrong?

*“What if I’m practicing wrong?”* This is the second most commonly asked question, especially by newer students.

Aside from whether or not students practice is the issue of *how* to proceed with that practice and if they cannot remember their moves perfectly or even at all, should they bother to practice.

I always encourage students to practice at home regardless of their confidence that their practice is fully correct. Sometimes students worry that they will develop bad habits if they practice incorrectly. There is little likelihood that bad habits will become irreparably ingrained during the practice time students sandwich for themselves between classes. It is better that students practice wrong than not practice at all.<sup>1</sup> Even wrong practice yields some benefits, even if only a reflective chuckle at some future point in time.

I’m also quite serious about the importance of not taking yourself too seriously. Many a time I’ve looked back over my own training and said, “Gee, I guess I didn’t know as much then as I thought I did.” Actually, I say this every year or so. With any luck, I’ll still be saying the same thing over years to come in reference to where I’m at right now. Reflecting back over past shortcomings holds the promise of many lessons all by itself because such reflection affords us reference points in the scheme of our development and, presumably, keeps us humble.

Teachers can usually tell when newer students have neglected to practice their new moves. There will be a conspicuous absence of consistency, whether right or wrong, in how the move is performed. This inconsistency makes more work for the teacher because correcting the student’s mistake is tantamount to teaching them the move over again from the start. Even if a student is practicing his move the wrong way, he will still develop a consistency about it so that corrections become easier because there will now be a frame of reference, albeit a ‘mistake’. It is much easier if I can advise a student, “Position yourself like this, rather than like that,” as opposed to advising, “Position yourself like so, rather than like this, that, the other thing or something else.” Having a reference point, even if it is a wrong reference point, makes getting it right much easier for both student and teacher.

### Group or Private

At some point, you may find yourself weighing the pros and cons of group versus private classes. Of the T’ai Chi teachers I know, most offer at least some group

classes, and some of those offer group classes only. My teacher, with whom I continue to work with whenever the occasion presents itself, does not actually maintain a physical school location. He eschews regular group classes in favor of private lessons and accelerated workshop formats. (Hey, if you are good enough.)

The advantage of group class is that one instructor can work with several, or even many, students at the same time. Consequently, the cost for group classes is generally less than the cost for private lessons. Group classes also offer opportunities for interacting with one's T'ai Chi peers. Interactions, like these, can be both instructive and fun because sharing an activity with similarly inclined individuals (see the section about Morphic Resonance in Chapter 11) can reinforce many of the lessons T'ai Chi holds for you. This can be particularly helpful when, as a newer student, you are able to see that many of the challenges and struggles that you are sure to encounter during the course of your studies are not exclusive to you.

Private (or semi-private) lessons offer the obvious advantage of receiving your teacher's more focused attention. Instead of your teacher basing his or her lesson plan on the collective agenda, there will be only you. At any given time, you may have issues with your own T'ai Chi practice that do not lend themselves to constructive scrutiny in a group situation. Private lesson time can give you a quality of attention, correction, and encouragement otherwise unavailable in a group class. The pacing of your instruction, whether it is slower and more detailed or faster because that is what you are ready for, can be customized according to your needs or preferences. Expect to pay more for private time as opposed to group classes.

Which approach is best? Whichever one that works for you is best. I think the *optimal* approach is one that blends group classes with private ones. From group classes, you derive the ongoing benefits of practicing with and around other people along with the conditioning benefits inherent in a regular structured practice, as well as the personalized attention of private lesson time geared exclusively toward your needs. Every student can benefit from at least an occasional private lesson, even if it is just once every month or two.

Incidentally, extra attention like this need not always come from your teacher. Many instructors have senior students who help out as teaching assistants. Their level of mastery may be well below their Instructor's, but still well beyond your own. And, teaching assistants often make up for in enthusiasm what they lack in teaching expertise. As a courtesy, be sure to clear any such arrangements with your Instructor beforehand to avoid any appearances of impropriety.

### Comporting Yourself in Class

T'ai Chi teachers, as mentioned earlier, all have their own way of structuring the classes they teach. Many variables may come into play; teachers may be more or less formal in their approach, their class enrollment may be larger or smaller, and the students to whom they address their lessons may be further along in their studies or less experienced at T'ai Chi. Some teachers follow a fairly standardized rou-

tine in how they conduct their classes. Others, myself included, tend toward a more eclectic approach.

Regardless of your teacher's approach or these variables, you must remember 'one thing' for which there are no variables if you expect to get the most out of your T'ai Chi classes. In the end, it is the student's responsibility to learn from the lessons offered by the teacher. Nobody can teach you if you cannot be taught. This might seem so obvious that it hardly warrants mention. But, it does sometimes happen that students come to class without really showing up. For example, teachers may be leading the class through a movement or exercise sequence, arranging their guidance so as to cue the class in on to how to follow along, and yet a student may miss certain important cues because he or she is just not sufficiently attentive to the teacher's lead.

This can happen with almost anybody now and then. It is the rare person who never shows up carrying excess baggage due to outside stresses or distractions from their daily life. If you have had a hard day and your mind is elsewhere, you might find it helpful to make a point to arrive a few minutes early for your class and just sit with some mindful breathing to ease yourself into a more deliberate state of mind/body awareness, rather than jumping right into class. You might also take care to let your teacher in on any extenuating circumstances that he or she should be aware of prior to your participation in class. (see the section on Bad Day? Attitude Adjustment in Chapter 11.) You cannot, after all, expect your teacher to advocate your best interests if he or she does not know what those interests are.

Every now and then, a student will give the impression of being out of touch with his or her body. All the more, it is important in a case such as this for such students to make their best effort to observe closely, watching for their teacher's subtle and not so subtle cues.<sup>2</sup> Remember, the first order of business is to pay attention, lest you miss out on any precious opportunities for guidance and learning. One way to consolidate your attention and stay focused on the lesson at hand is to bring a deliberate sense of respect to your studies.

### **The Role of Respect in T'ai Chi**

At my school, students often bow on entering and leaving the training facility. I don't make a big fuss over this because my T'ai Chi program is generally a bit less formal than my Kung Fu program. The incoming T'ai Chi students do, however, observe the Kung Fu students bowing on the way out and often follow their example.

One of my T'ai Chi students asked about the correct way to bow. He noted that the (informal) salutation I use to address my students at the beginning and end of each class varied from that of another teacher whom my school had hosted for classes. Which was the right way, this student wanted to know, and how exactly were the hands to be held when bowing to show respect? I answered the specific question he asked, but continued on to explain that the positioning of the hands

was really a matter of little concern. The most important thing about bowing was to feel and express, even if only for a brief moment, a genuine sense of respect from within.

Bowing before the altar at the beginning of class (as we do in Kung Fu) or as I enter the school evokes for me, even after all these years, a remembrance of where I've been on my own journey, as well as a sense of connection to those who have gone before. It is this thread back to the past, that helps me to appreciate my roots, to be in the moment at hand, and to feel more inspired in moving towards the future, all at once.

According to Chinese medicine, the body's organs<sup>3</sup> house various energies, qualities both virtuous and potentially harmful. The heart is understood to house 'respect', a matter of particular significance for all aspiring martial artists because it is widely understood that people tend to commit more reliably to memory those events or experiences that have some emotional (heartfelt) impact associated with them. The memories of events eliciting stronger emotions actually become more durably hardwired into the body and the brain than do memories of less highly charged experiences.<sup>4</sup>

By way of illustration, it is probably a safe assumption that you, in reflecting back to your youth, can recall scenes from some classroom in which your teacher was uninspiring or the curriculum itself boring (see Figure 1-5). In such a scenario, any learning was probably drudgery at best, often destined to be forgotten as soon as the test or course was over and done with. Conversely, if you can recall a teacher who really cared or who inspired you, or a curriculum that caught your imagination, you can probably, even to this day, evoke in your mind's eye vivid scenes from that classroom setting (see Figure 1-6). This is because that experience was not merely cognitive, but a positive emotional one as well, commanding your respect and allowing you to 'learn' with your heart and your soul as well as your head.

Whatever respect you feel need not be just a transient and coincidental feeling. The respect you feel can add an emotional element to your experience and, by so doing, catalyze an enhanced memorization/recall of whatever learning is at hand. If you take this a step further, the idea of respect is not limited to T'ai Chi learning. It is something that can be felt at any time in any situation. We can all use, and feel, a little more respect in our dealings with others. You do not have to agree with someone, or even like them, in order to respect them. A little bit of respect can go a long way. Think about this when you enter your school, and when you leave.

How might this manifest for you in a practical way? You can start by recognizing that the learnings you are being gifted with have roots going back many generations to men (mostly) who devoted their lives, often in the face of great hardship, to training their T'ai Chi to a high level. If it were not for these men, you might be tap dancing instead of learning T'ai Chi. Think about it. You can also presume that your teacher, whomever he or she might be, underwent (at least some) similar rig-

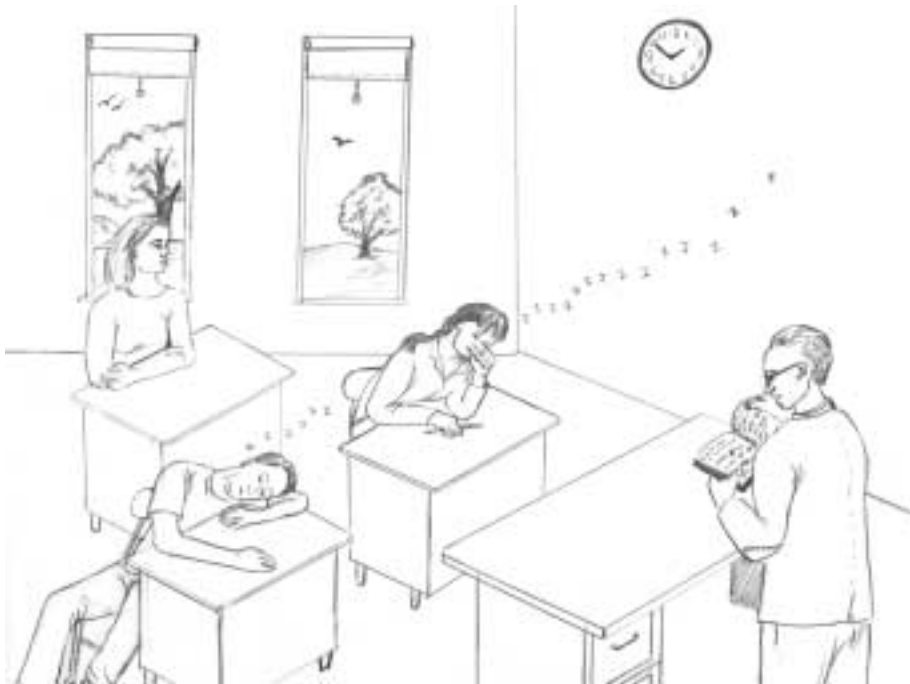


Figure 1-5. Have you ever been bored in a classroom?

ors and sacrifice in order to eventually share those teachings with you. It is for this reason that I find myself humbled in the presence of my own teacher, friend to me that he is. Beyond his being my teacher, he is also a *presence* in my life, and it is the 'presence' as much as the teacher that inspires my awe. This acquiescence, this arriving with your cup only half something, whether full or empty, will allow you to more fully absorb the learnings at hand. The bottom line is that if it is worth learning, it is worth respecting.

I would only add that respect is a two-way street. Though I don't expect the absence of reciprocal respect is nearly as common a dynamic as one might infer from some of those old Chinese Kung Fu movies (the ones in which teachers are shown maltreating their students). There are, in fact, teachers out there who hold themselves apart and aloof from their students, sometimes to the point of disdain. Just as the student must respect the teacher and the teachings in order to derive an optimal benefit, so must the teacher respect his students in order to help them learn. After all, if it were not for students there would be no need for teachers. The student/teacher relationship is symbiotic. Respect, therefore, must be mutual. Respect can take many forms, some forms being more conspicuous than others, but disdain or abuse are not among them.

#### Divergent Agendas

No doubt, when you undertake your studies, you will have in mind for yourself some idea, concept, or image of just what you hope to accomplish through your



Figure 1-6. Can you recall having been inspired by a teacher?

study of T'ai Chi Chuan. Perhaps you have a fairly tangible and down-to-earth goal, such as reduced stress, renewed health, or improved flexibility. Or, less concretely, you may imagine yourself as an eventual master of T'ai Chi Chuan. No matter, it is good to enter into your studies with a sense of purpose, or even ambition, as that can help you to stay present to yourself and on track. Having a goal, or goals will serve as a frame of reference against which you can measure your own perceived progress.

Something for you to keep in mind, however, is that which you *want* from T'ai Chi and that which you *need* from T'ai Chi may not be one and the same thing. Who is to say what is best for you? Ideally, the pursuit of whatever goals you have set for yourself should play out as some sort of collaborative effort between you and your teacher. Exactly how you then set about to accomplish your goals is one area where you are probably best off deferring to your teacher's guidance.

Your teacher will be more knowledgeable about T'ai Chi than you and may know better than you what it is you need, in order to make progress, at any given stage in your training. I am not suggesting you surrender your personal agenda for that of someone else, as in some cult. But, if you are going to trust your teacher to guide you through the intricacies of T'ai Chi Chuan, then you must be prepared to acquiesce to his or her best judgment when the occasion calls for it. Indeed, one of the traits of a good teacher is his or her ability to put your long-term interests ahead of your short-term goals. Mind you, there is nothing inherently wrong with short-

term goals, but if you get too wrapped up in them, your ambition can cloud your judgment. Your teacher's job is remain objective, even should you veer from your path. When a student takes a notion about what he needs or wants to do next, without an objective sense for what is in his best interests, his training may go askew. I'm reminded here of the woman I described in my first book who only wanted to swing her arms about, making up her T'ai Chi as she went along. Your teacher will likely have been at teaching for a longer time than you have been studenting. This makes him the person best qualified to guide you along in your studies. Any time you find yourself having doubts about this, it might be a good time for you to sit down with your teacher and share your concerns openly and honestly. You might both learn something.

#### Following Along/Spatial Awareness

Students participating in class should always make their best effort to emulate as closely as possible their teacher's lead. You can ask questions, read books, or watch from the sidelines to learn *about* T'ai Chi, but if you want to *learn* T'ai Chi, you have to 'do it'. The best way to do it in a way that allows 'it' to become yours is by following your teacher's lead, just as he followed his teacher, and his teacher's teacher before. T'ai Chi is an example of a tradition passed down primarily through somatic mimicry,<sup>5</sup> versus oral or written history.

Sometimes your efforts at following your teacher's lead can be a bit disorienting. Your teacher may move around the room in a way that confuses your perspective, or you may happen to be at the back of the class or otherwise at a poor vantage point. Some people learn optimally according to where or how they position themselves. I know that I have a preferred vantage point from which I seem best able to absorb new information. This is particularly so with any information requiring any spatial awareness for its absorption. Other possible sticking points when following your teacher's lead can include right/left orientation and mirror imaging, which can also be issues of spatial awareness.

Some teachers may guide students through exercises or form practice by facing forward, with their backs to their class. This effectively eliminates mirror-imaging issues because students can just follow exactly as their teacher guides them. The disadvantage to this arrangement is that teachers facing away from their class cannot easily observe the performance of their students, nor can students see the fronts of their teacher's bodies. Mirrors mounted against the wall in front of the teacher (assuming you are indoors) can alleviate this problem. To better observe students in class, teachers may turn to face their group. Some students, however, may still experience confusion as to whether to follow along as if watching in a mirror, or reverse their left/right orientation. You should discuss this with your teacher to avoid any confusion.

In guiding students, I generally utilize both of these methods. I usually alternate between front and back perspectives when demonstrating a move for students

or when guiding the class through a sequence. With my back to the class, students can simply follow along. When facing toward my group, I reverse my direction in order to give the class a mirror like image to follow. If there are more experienced students sprinkled about in class, the newer students generally take their cues from them. Otherwise, if there are mostly novice students present, I may explain how I will guide students prior to actually leading the class through any moves so that participants know in advance what to expect and are not left guessing.

Newer students are often prone to some degree of anxiety about learning what they do not already know (the unknown does have a way of provoking anxiety). Providing students with some advance disclosure, in even the simplest of ways, about what they can expect will usually go a long way in mitigating any learning or performance anxiety new students may be prone to. Advance disclosure also provides a tacit reassurance of the teacher's overall ability to meet the learning needs of those who seek their guidance.

### Pantograph

As a teacher of both Kung Fu and T'ai Chi with over three decades of teaching experience, I have observed the learning styles of a great many students under a wide range of learning conditions. Such conditions have varied in their contexts from:

- A. Private lessons, during which students can be attended to on an individual basis according to how they learn best, to...
- B. Group classes, at which the entire class may be expected to adjust to the teacher's agenda during any given session, to...
- C. Seminar intensives, where many more students than can be attended to individually may each be trying to memorize complicated and lengthy form routines that are being taught at an accelerated pace.

Different teaching situations, as well as students' innately different learning styles, all place their unique demands on participating students' abilities to learn.

In the case of T'ai Chi, sooner or later all students must come to terms with learning a T'ai Chi form routine,<sup>6</sup> be it short or long. Some students who are naturally adept at body learning and memorization may be able to pick up new moves quickly and easily. Meanwhile, others might struggle in their efforts to commit their movement patterns to memory. For some students, movement sequences themselves can be like some foreign language.

People's minds may be prone to get in the way of their bodies. This can be seen in students who struggle with such memorization, or even with highly skilled learners in accelerated learning formats. Feelings of anxiety or confusion can impede memorization. In most cases, if students can just simply manage to repeat a movement pattern over and over, perhaps a dozen to several dozen times, without their minds somehow or other muddling things up for their bodies, the moves will start to sink into their bodies and come to feel less daunting and more attainable. The



trick for these students is to effectively sidestep their own mental interference during their *initial* attempts at memorization.

Students whose minds seem to get in the way of their bodies can imagine themselves (their bodies) as a *pantograph*.

A pantograph is a mechanical copying device commonly used in drafting or machine work. Professional models of this device can be quite sophisticated, but inexpensive plastic or wooden versions can sometimes be found in art supply or children's stores. In brief, a pantograph works as follows. A pencil, for example, is attached at one end of the pantograph. As the user draws with this pencil, say on a sheet of paper, a second pencil attached elsewhere on the pantograph simultaneously reproduces that drawing according to a variable scale on a separate sheet of paper. The user need only to pay attention to his or her drawing in progress because the remote copying process is, itself, automatic.

T'ai Chi students who are trying to emulate accurately, in order to eventually memorize moves being shown to them by their teacher, can sidestep their propensity for mental interference by imagining their bodies functioning as pantographs, that is as automatic copying devices. Rather than trying to figure out mentally what your teacher is doing as you follow along, just imagine that *your body is your teacher's body*. Whatever your teacher's body does so must your body do, automatically and without thinking it through. If you do this correctly, you will feel as if your body is on automatic pilot. You may not get the deeper internal components of that which you are trying to absorb, not immediately, but you will gain something, and something is better than nothing. The 'something' you gain will establish a framework at least, and will provide you with a basis for a better grasp as you continue your practice over time.

I have always been a stickler for detail, for getting movements as close to perfect as was possible when working with my teachers, regardless of the context. On those occasions that have been one shot deals, such as when I studied in China and could not just return at some later date to check with a teacher to make sure I had gotten all of my moves right, I had to get my lesson right the first time or not at all. Imagining myself as a pantograph enabled me to grasp even the subtleties of movements that most certainly would have eluded me otherwise. Being a kinesthetic learner, my imagining myself as a pantograph allowed me to sidestep the cognitive/memorization aspects of the learning process and translate new learnings directly into my body. By the time I was ready to *think* about memorization my body had already ingrained the moves.

The technique of imagining yourself as a pantograph need not be limited to new students or concepts. This approach also works amazingly well if you know a movement routine already, but want to fine-tune it with a more precise attention to details.

### Simple Training Tips

It is inevitable that some people just do not know how to learn T'ai Chi well, despite their best efforts to do so. On more than one occasion, I've worked with students who, though intelligent and otherwise well adjusted, were just not the memorizing-movement-routine types. Subsequently, such students have appealed to me after making a reasonable effort to memorize their moves, bemoaning that they were not making any headway into the form. What, they pleaded, could they do to improve their ability to recall the moves of the T'ai Chi form? Here I have compiled some simple training methods and tips, any one or combination of which may help to streamline your acquisition of the moves of the T'ai Chi form.

- One of the simplest things you can do to augment your learning process is to arrive early for your classes and ask your teacher or senior classmates for extra help. Even if supplementary help is unavailable, you can use such early arrival time for extra practice on your own or with peer classmates. You may find that your practice just feels easier and more natural in an environment that is familiar and which already serves as an anchor in your mind as having an association with the learning of T'ai Chi.
- When new moves involve footwork, watch and emulate your teacher's feet first before attending next to the movements of the waist and finally to those of the upper body and arms. Try to learn your moves from the ground up. This may take some discipline, as it is often the teacher's head and upper body/arms that command the initial attention of those who are trying to follow along.
- Practice anything new that you have learned several times over. Then distract yourself for a few moments, perhaps with casual conversation or a break from practice, before trying to do what you have learned again. By doing so, you can determine if your new moves have been locked into your short-term memory. If not, repeat your practice/distract pattern until you have solidified your grasp of the lesson at hand. This approach gives you every opportunity to forget what you have just been taught in a most advantageous way. After all, if you are going to forget something, you might as well forget while you are still in class so you can consult your teacher for a reminder while he or she is still handy.
- Set yourself the goal of learning *one new thing* at each class you attend. Sometimes your best efforts at recall can be undermined by information overload. If you get in the habit of committing to memory one new piece of information at each class you attend, whether it be a stretching exercise, a new move, or a memorable quip from your teacher, you will begin to compile in your body/mind a veritable library of information. As your library builds, so will your capacity for recall. Two such improvements each week will amount to one hundred each year!

- Maintain a written log or a sketchbook with simple directions or stick figures, or tape a narration of your moves to prompt your recall. For kinesthetic learners, sometimes the mere act of committing newly learned moves to paper or audiotape can help you translate visual or auditory information to or from the kinesthetic realm.
- Between the end of any learning session and whatever next activity you engage in, try to review in your mind, as best you can, what you learned in that last session. Especially, you can do this if you are driving, or being driven, home after class (not to the point of being distracted from safety, of course). As soon as you reach your destination, review several times with actual practice what you have been visualizing in your mind.

### Build Your Own Library

Another training method you might work with to accomplish an initial grasp of your moves involves the use of simple video technology. Generally, I am not a big proponent of videos as a way to learn T'ai Chi. There are some very good commercial videos available for teaching you *about* T'ai Chi, but unless the form routine demonstrated in the video is exactly the same as the one you are learning, videos are likely to raise more questions than they answer. It can, however, be very helpful to videotape your practice sessions, perhaps in collaboration with your instructor. A half-hour private lesson with your teacher and a video camera is about all it should take for you to capture your moves on film for objective review and home practice. This way you will be sure to have an accurate film version of whatever form or moves you are learning. Then if you forget a move or just want to review your technique, you need only push the Play button. Just remember that watching yourself on video is not a substitute for actual practice. If you update your video library every couple or few months, you can do a comparative analysis of what you *were* doing against what you *are* doing to get some sense of personal progress and to see where further improvements might still be in order.

### ESTABLISHING PARAMETERS

#### Social Aspects of T'ai Chi

Practicing along with others can be an effective way for you to memorize your lessons and improve your skill level. The practice of T'ai Chi by a group of like-minded persons often has a very different energy about it than does solo practice. Group practice tends to exemplify that dynamic in which the whole is said to be greater than the sum of the individual parts. Partaking in T'ai Chi as a collective endeavor can definitely raise your energy level and inspire you in your training.

People undertake their study of T'ai Chi for many reasons, not the least of which is that it gives them an opportunity to share what is often a positive and life changing experience with other persons who may be moving along a similar path. It seems only reasonable that new friendships may be forged from such sharing.

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**S**ocial patterns will vary from school to school, but I can think of no compelling reason why students should not make friends at class. I can think of reasons why the interpersonal politics often concomitant to social interactions should be maintained as discreet within the sanctity of one's learning environment.

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Your practice of T'ai Chi can produce all manner of personal revelations and insights, some of which can be joyous and liberating, while others may be challenging to the point of frustration. These experiences will be your own, but they may also be shared, as others around you are almost certain to have been similarly graced. Knowing that another student has traveled down a path similar to the one you are on can provide some reassurance and validation to your experiences in times of uncertainty. Eventually, your turn may come to be cast in the same role for others who look to you for guidance, reassurance or inspiration.

#### Your Teacher/Your Friend

Speaking of the social environment in your school, what kind of rapport might one expect to have with one's Instructor? Teachers vary widely in how emotionally available they are to their students as well as to the degree of personal disclosure they are comfortable with. Most experienced teachers recognize the propensity of (at least some) students towards either *projection* or *transferential* behavior. In brief, these are different ways of inappropriately projecting imagined qualities onto another person, often an authority figure. Over my many years of teaching, there have been occasions when students have entered into class just bubbling with enthusiasm. They've read or heard all about T'ai Chi, or about me, and, having chosen me as their teacher, they are certain that I must be the greatest thing since sliced bread. Should they fail to accelerate in their learning, or perhaps when some real or imagined foible on my part confirms my mere humanity, what was once enthusiasm can turn quickly into despair or blame. And, quick as a wink, they are off to sign up for yoga class or whatever may be next on their list, no doubt destined to repeat the pattern. (In a case such as I have just described, the teacher may never have been accorded full status as an 'actual' person. Rather he may have been perceived, unconsciously, as an 'object' whose sole purpose was to gratify the student's needs, whether reasonable or not. Inappropriate objectification such as this is rarely all encompassing, but may occur more commonly as a transitional dynamic when students are provoked somehow in their personal growth process.)

Understandably, teachers try to avoid these kinds of dynamics and one way to do so is by not setting themselves up for them in the first place. If your teacher seems a little standoffish outside the classroom, that may be why. It is probably a good idea for you to avoid emotional entanglements with your teacher, at least at

first, until both you and your teacher have had a chance to develop a sense of each other. That said, there is no reason why students and teachers cannot have warm and mutually regarding relationships, providing everybody's needs have been taken into account. As a new student, however, it is probably most respectful for you to defer to whatever standard or timetable your teacher sets for himself on this matter.

### Working with Different Teachers

Some students may have occasion to work with more than one teacher. You may actually change teachers due to relocation or personal preferences, or you might augment your studies with your regular teacher by participating in workshops offered by visiting instructors, and so on. In either case, you are likely to observe that different teachers have different teaching methods as well as different interpretations and methods of executing this move or that.

If there is one thing I've learned from my experience of having worked with different teachers, it is that reality is subjective. This was a lesson that was reinforced by many years in relationship with an 'other half'. I learned that 'reality' is not only subjective; it can, in fact, be widely variable and at times arbitrary.

Given that we T'ai Chi practitioners always seek the most efficient and most effective ways of practicing our T'ai Chi, there exists some potential for confusion when two different teachers each share with you their own distinct most efficient and most effective practice methods. Which way is more correct? Who is right, and who is wrong? Or, who is more right? Sometimes, just as in relationships and life in general, issues such as these cannot be reduced to black and white, right or wrong. Sometimes two seemingly opposite dynamics can each not be wrong.

Students, quite reasonably, seek guidance in the correct method of practice. Sometimes different instructional perspectives may appear to contradict each other, but that need not mean they are in opposition. There are several ways that your grasp of this premise (that there may be more than one viable reality), might be applied practically in your studies.

First, when working with different teachers' different methods, try to maintain an open mind, which is almost never a bad thing. Maintaining an open mind is a quality that every truly skilled teacher possesses in some form or fashion.

Second, this premise will help you to develop critical thinking skills of your own, which are also quite necessary in order to develop a higher level of T'ai Chi skill. Just because others have dissimilar methods, which may work perfectly well for those who embrace those methods, does not mean their methods must become your methods. The reason there are so many different methods in the first place is because different approaches work differently for different people. You must examine the evidence and decide what works best for you. If your current skill level does not allow yet for this level of discernment, be patient. With the experience you gain from continued practice, you will know soon enough how to discriminate between what works for you and what does not.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, this understanding may help to mitigate confusion on your part about the comparative credibility of whatever different teachers you work with. Recognizing and appreciating the potential for separate and oblique realities can help to prevent your becoming disillusioned by any messages you receive which appear to be mixed.

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**T**'ai Chi on the one hand is articulate and precise. On the other hand, it can appear every bit as muddled as the rest of life.

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### A Fair Exchange of Energy

Earlier, I listed the main three criteria for a good teacher: knowledge of the subject, ability to communicate that knowledge effectively, and business acumen adequate to at least keep the school's doors from closing. Students also have a role in this latter concern. Business is always a two-way street. On the rarest of occasions, teachers may be philanthropic or have a source of other primary income sufficient that they can afford to offer T'ai Chi at a nominal cost or even freely as a gift. More realistically, you will probably have to dig into your wallet and pay for your classes. This is an eminently fair arrangement because money is simply a material representation of the energy you expend to earn it. Similarly, your teacher's knowledge is a direct representation of his or her labors, which, in all likelihood, he or she spent dearly to learn as well. Thus, your paying for your classes in which you derive the benefit of your teacher's expertise amounts to a form of energy exchange.

How much is that expertise/energy worth? That's to be negotiated between you and your teacher and will likely vary according to a range of economic considerations. Classes in the park may be cheap. Classes at the community center or local "Y" may be less cheap. Classes at an actual school, where there may be a considerable overhead to be met, will likely be least cheap of all. Keep in mind that there are costs to doing business above and beyond overhead, which by itself can be considerable. All this aside, the value of T'ai Chi instruction is like anything else in that it can be subject to the dictates of supply and demand, as well as being due, at least in part, to whatever subjective value a teacher attaches to the instruction he or she offers.

I regard my own (martial arts) education as comparable to that which I might have acquired at any Ivy League school. I am accomplished at my chosen path and very favorably disposed to what I do for a living, helping others to learn T'ai Chi Chuan in a way that adds real value and meaning to their lives. I'm also not averse to earning the best living I can in exchange for the services I provide, which simply reinforces my commitment to being the very best teacher I possibly can be. My earning a good living also helps to insure that I will remain both motivated and available to continue teaching and meeting my students' needs for some time to come. This is the (less than altruistic sounding) reality of how this arrangement works regardless of what kind of spin someone might put on it. I love my work and

count my blessings every day that I'm able to teach, but it is my success at the business of teaching that allows me to stay with it full time.

### The Process of Business

When you do finally enroll for your classes, there is likely to be some form of verbal, if not written, agreement between you and your teacher, or his representative, as to who is responsible for what. In its most simple guise, it will be your teacher's job to guide you in your learning process in exchange for which you agree to pay a certain amount in the way of tuition. As long as both parties do what they have agreed to do, your arrangement should remain copacetic. If either party fails to perform as agreed, problems may ensue. Should this happen, it can be a real test of your T'ai Chi skill and that of your teacher's.

The prevailing trend in the (external style) martial arts industry, at this time, is to enroll students on contract and then have third-party companies handle billing and collection. This may offer certain advantages in some cases, e.g., better time management, and / or fewer headaches. In keeping with my commitment to being process oriented, I prefer to keep the handling of money (as well as all the issues concomitant to the exchange of money) between my students and myself. Some people who are in the business of teaching may just prefer having things run smoothly and may prefer not to deal with problems. I, frankly, do not mind 'problems' when they arise because, in seeking to resolve them, I have an opportunity to apply my T'ai Chi skills in ways that are practical and that serve as learning models to further empower my students.

Generally, problems can be avoided by both parties being clear and unambiguous, and at the same time remaining oriented toward the process and the spirit of the exchange. This last part is important because it may allow for some fluidity in your arrangements. That is not to say you should plan to renegotiate your tuition on a monthly basis. But if a student comes to me and says he has lost his job and cannot afford classes until he finds some work, I'm likely to respond back that, "*Now, more than ever, during this stressful period is when participation in T'ai Chi classes can be of benefit to you. How's about it if you attend classes for now and pay me later when you can once again afford to do so.*" Not all teachers can afford to do this, nor might I except under circumstances which I deemed to be appropriate.

Too often it is the case that there may exist some undertone of adversity between people who engage each other in commerce, each trying to get or maintain the upper hand. By comporting yourselves as outlined above, the business of T'ai Chi can proceed under a different paradigm.

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**Y**ou are sure to get more from your studies if you approach them with the idea that in T'ai Chi the student and the teacher really are there to be each other's advocates.

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## MEASURING YOUR PROGRESS

As long as I'm on the topic of "Your Course of Study," I ought to address the delicate issue of measuring one's progress at learning T'ai Chi. Granted, I am an advocate of a process-oriented approach, a theme that underscores my T'ai Chi practice as well as my teaching method. Being process oriented and, at the same, being oriented towards a particular goal are not mutually exclusive agendas. One part of many people's process is that they (understandably) want some means by which they can gauge the return on their investment. In this case, their investment is one of time, money, and energy spent at learning T'ai Chi. Students often want to know how they are doing on the T'ai Chi learning curve.

Let's begin, now, by establishing some sort of learning curve. What makes this task daunting is the fact that there are no set standards for progress between the different styles of T'ai Chi, or even within the same style from school to school. Why? Probably because there has been no compelling need for any such standards. Among themselves, T'ai Chi masters need only a brief exposure to someone else's T'ai Chi in order to assess, almost instantaneously, at least their general level of skill. In contrast to the Karate systems that rely universally on colored belts to denote rank, T'ai Chi schools that employ a ranking system are the exception, rather than the rule. In comparison to students of martial disciplines that use belt ranking, most T'ai Chi students have no frame of reference against which to measure how far they have come and where they have yet to go. Bearing in mind the variables of different styles and different teaching standards, not to mention that progress is a relative concept in any case, I will proceed in the most general way to distinguish between the various levels of expertise. Let me hasten to add, before doing so, that what follows is based on my experience as a teacher and as a seasoned judge and arbiter at T'ai Chi tournaments. Other teachers may have standards that depart, in some cases significantly, from my own. What follows is intended as a general guideline only.

Tournament protocol, despite the varying standards that exist between tournaments, represents the model closest to a universal standard. In this model T'ai Chi competitors are, typically and in the interest of fairness, separated into competition divisions according to either their accumulated time of study or, more ambiguously, their designation as Novice, Beginner, Intermediate, or Advanced level practitioners. I will try to combine these two standards somewhat.

### The Novice

Tabula rasa, the Novice brings a cup that is neither half full nor half empty, but ideally void of all save for ambition and enthusiasm to learn. Students at my school learn, among other things, the traditional 108-move Yang style form. I maintain a 'beginners venue' in which the students learn just the first section, 17 moves, of this long form as an entry-level curriculum. New students, Novices, start right off learning the first section of the form.



Novices are those students, from entry level on up who have not yet reached a point at which they can demonstrate a confident recall of the initial moves comprising the first section of the form. Novice students need not be proficient, but they must be competent at this first section before they are allowed to advance to the next sections of the form.

Novices typically display a conspicuous absence of command, to the point of struggle, with balance, sequence memorization, bouncing, foot alignment, continuity of flow, and so on. The kinds of questions that Novices ask often center around either “How do I do this move?” or more globally “What can T’ai Chi do for me?” or “Is there room in my life for T’ai Chi/Is there room in T’ai Chi for my life?” These kinds of questions reflect how Novices are not yet committed to T’ai Chi as a given in their life. There is often a sense of awe and wonderment for Novices as it begins to dawn on them that T’ai Chi is both harder than it looks and seemingly magical in its possibilities.

### The Beginner

Probably six to twelve months into one’s studies, a milestone is reached as the student realizes he or she can practice the first section of the form, more or less on automatic pilot, without needing to stop and think in order to recall each move. Having the moves more thoroughly ingrained, students can now begin to focus on stepping in a more balanced manner versus ‘falling’, maintaining a properly aligned posture during practice, opening the Kua, maintaining a consistent pace, and so on.

Along with this improvement, Beginner students become more circumspect about their practice. Questions begin to surface about how different aspects of T’ai Chi practice interrelate. As often as not, these questions are not relevant to whatever lesson is immediately at hand. This is because Beginners are still trying to organize, in their cognitive selves, the many distinct aspects of T’ai Chi into one intelligent whole. Sometimes, Beginners’ questions may beg answers that would seem beyond the inquirers’ ability to apply practically, given where they are in their training, even though, to themselves, their questions seem timely. Concomitant to this, there is a tendency for Beginners to hold themselves to a higher and more self-critical standard as their capacities for discrimination begin to improve. Students at this level also begin to display some initial *imprinting*. That is, students will naturally, and mostly unconsciously, begin to assume certain of the practice characteristics particular to their teacher, often to the extent that colleagues or teachers from outside the school may speculate, “Oh, he or she looks to be so-and-so’s student.”

During this phase, the student continues to learn the T’ai Chi form in its entirety. Pushing Hands skills may be introduced at this level with a consequent developing awareness of how T’ai Chi’s overall emphasis on sensitivity can be applied in relation to other persons. During this stage, students may also be eligible, on a case-by-case basis, to begin their study of T’ai Chi weapons as an adjunct to their regular training.

### The Intermediate

At some point, usually two or three years into one's studies, a subtle transition occurs from Beginner level to Intermediate level. By this stage, the student has completed, and can recall, the form in its entirety, though there may still be occasional lapses. The teacher's 'signature' will now be indelibly imprinted in most or all aspects of the student's expression of his or her T'ai Chi in much the same way that artists, dancers, or musicians often reflect the style of great masters with whom they have apprenticed. Students are definitely feeling their oats, having reached an Intermediate level, and this may be expressed in their willingness or desire to experiment and challenge the validity of earlier learnings. Intermediates are kind of like teenagers in this sense because they perceive themselves as now privy to T'ai Chi's world of wonders from the inside out rather than from the outside in, as was the case during their initial stages of training. This will also be reflected in the nature and quality of the questions they ask. Typically, Intermediate level questions are well thought out and appropriate to whatever is the topic at hand. If the answers to their questions are beyond their immediate ability to integrate into their practice, Intermediates are perfectly capable of filing those answers away for future reference.

Intermediate level students have also arrived at a stage of beginning to be more objective about their knowledge. That is, they can have some appreciation for what they have accomplished and yet some awareness of the vast learning that still lies ahead. With Novices and Beginners, the enormity of the, as yet, unknown remains largely abstract. Intermediates are more deliberately conscious of what they do not know, even if only in a general sense.

If students, up to this point, have eschewed Pushing Hands practice, T'ai Chi weapons training, or adjunctive internal development disciplines, as is sometimes the case due to personal preferences or teacher prerogative, I'm more inclined to nudge them in that direction at this stage as a means of assuring that their training is well rounded.

Intermediate level students may also benefit from helping out with less experienced students. Whether or not they are designated as teaching assistants, (advanced) Intermediate level students might discuss with their Instructor some role as informal mentors for their Novice and Beginner level classmates. Sometimes the best way to improve on what you have learned is to try to teach what you think you already know.

### Advanced Practitioners

Practitioners generally evolve to an Advanced level, after seven to ten years of serious training (in my case, it was more like fifteen years). At this level, students will be more self-directed in their practice. Advanced students will still stand to benefit from maintaining close ties with their teacher (there is, after all, always more to learn). Increasingly, Advanced level practitioners will gain insight from comparative studies and exposure to other internal styles or systems such as Bagua (Pa

Qua), Liu He Ba Fa, Xingyi (Hsing I), or from other masters, as well as from time spent with teaching colleagues. Advanced level practitioners are also more likely to glean information from the many literary treatises on T'ai Chi. Veiled as they often are in metaphor, many of the older Classics are best understood by those already privy, through the trials of practice, to the messages they carry.

As with the earlier stages, Advanced practitioners will/should still have questions, perhaps more so than at any previous stage of training. As often as not, their questions will be self-directed and concerned with the finer points of practice and, just as often, will go unasked as Advanced students seek out their own answers from within. The challenges commensurate with continuing to improve one's skill at this level become greater, rather than lesser, as the standard of excellence feels simultaneously within one's grasp and yet all the more elusive. This is all to be expected as part of the process of learning to become your own teacher.

Practitioners at this level, unless there is some extenuating circumstance or preference, ought to be teaching, even if just a few private students or an occasional class at the local community center. I have a teacher with whom I continue to work. Yet, with all due respect to him, the greater part of my continued learning comes from my teaching T'ai Chi to others. This continues to be the case, even though teaching T'ai Chi is something I have now been doing for over twenty-five years (since long before I should have been, given what I know now). Even at this point, I feel as if the possibilities for learning are limitless.

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**T**eaching T'ai Chi provides a way to continually challenge the boundaries of your knowledge, vicariously, through the experiences of your students.

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## Mastery

This is a subject that begs its own tarmac. We will be landing there shortly.

### Be Patient, You Will Get There

Please keep in mind that these descriptions of the various levels are for general information purposes only. They are intended to give you some sense of possible milestones along your way. I suggest that you not try to use these guidelines to influence your training or the manner in which you comport yourself in class as a way to affect any stage of proficiency to which you might aspire. For example, if you are a Beginner aspiring to Intermediate proficiency, you are not going reach that stage any faster by asking Intermediate-type questions. Emulating others who are more skilled than you is one expedient way to improve your own level. But, there is no need to rush. Wherever you are at in your training is exactly where you are supposed to be, so just stay (mindfully, as best you can) with your own process.

## Conclusion

Obviously, there are a great many factors that *can* be taken into consideration during the course your studies. I say ‘can’ rather than ‘must’ because the *process* of T’ai Chi is multi-faceted and many of its components are elective. Regardless, the process of T’ai Chi will entail considerable effort on your part. It does not simply happen by itself. A useful first step in that process is the awareness that there *is* a process. By keeping your finger on the pulse of your experiences, you are sure to find yourself more productively empowered during the course of your T’ai Chi education.

## Things to Remember

- To derive the most from their studies, students should collaborate with their teachers and assume a share of the responsibility for what they learn.
- Getting the most from your studies starts with being a discriminating consumer.
- Frequency of attendance will influence your learning. Find a pace that works well for you.
- The same goes for practice at home. Practice begets improvement. Do it, but don’t overdo it.
- Don’t worry about practicing wrong. A good teacher will provide corrections when appropriate. That said, don’t be shy about asking for help.
- Group and private lessons each offer advantages. Occasional private lessons (at least) can accelerate your learning process.
- ‘Show up’ and be really present when attending lessons.
- You are the ultimate beneficiary of whatever respect you bring to your studies.
- Once you have chosen a teacher to guide you in your studies, take his or her advice to heart in matters of T’ai Chi.
- Attention to ‘spatial orientation’ can make your learning easier.
- Be clear and responsible about your business dealings as part of your T’ai Chi process.
- If knowing where you are on the T’ai Chi learning curve is important to you, discuss this with your teacher. Remember, labels are only a map of sorts and can be limited in how they reflect on you.

## References

1. ‘Wrong’ practice may be all right sometimes. Unsafe practice is never acceptable. Consult your Instructor when safety is in question.
2. A little further on in this chapter, I describe a particular learning technique that is based on a mechanical device known as a pantograph. Students with deficient attention issues may find this technique helpful in enabling them to

- follow along more profitably as their Instructor shepherds the class through its practice.
3. Or more accurately, the organ systems in a non-literal sense.
  4. Candace Pert in her book, *Molecules of Emotion*, explains the biochemical rationale of this process well.
  5. To commit to memory one's lessons by following along and imitating with one's body.
  6. I have one student who is both a psychotherapist and a T'ai Chi teacher who works successfully with an older population at senior centers in her area. Many of her students lack either the interest or the ability to memorize lengthy form routines. Another student of mine teaches T'ai Chi at an assisted living facility for Alzheimer's patients. Lest I discourage those individuals who fit these or similar profiles from undertaking the study of T'ai Chi, let me emphasize that memorization of the T'ai Chi form is not necessary in order to derive many of the benefits that T'ai Chi has to offer.

## CONTEMPORARY VIEWS ON AN ANCIENT ART

More and more people all over the world are studying Tai Chi. No matter what style they study, what direction they take, or what level they are at, all agree on one thing: Tai Chi is a limitless journey and there is always more to be learned. There are so many questions along the way and everyone has them, students and teachers alike, questions that are fundamental to all styles of Tai Chi, fundamental to all learning processes.

*Exploring Tai Chi* helps students to understand the intricacies of Tai Chi training, as well as the underlying motives and psychological processes involved in any ongoing practice of this ancient discipline. Explore discussions on 'disclosure' and 'empowerment' for the Tai Chi practitioner, what to expect of your training, how to progress in your training, and how to implement the principles of Tai Chi into your everyday life.

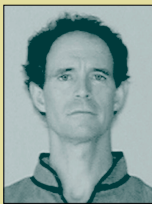
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"For many practitioners Tai Chi remains something they merely 'do', as opposed to its becoming an indelible part of who they are. Tai Chi is, on the one hand, a tool for personal development. On the other, it is a metaphor for living life in the clearest, most efficient, and most deliberate way." —from the Preface.

"The essence of this book has to do with the quantifiable and qualifiable benefits of Tai Chi, benefits such as rooting, stress reduction, cultivating your Chi, and living heartfully." —Chapter 10: Are You Living Your Tai Chi?

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