

Tai Chi Through the Years by Caroline Demoise, 2006



In the beginning, when I began learning tai chi, I didn't really understand the complexity of the art. I'd been told that it would be good for me so I went to class. It felt like an exercise designed to show me how uncoordinated and stiff I really was and it appeared to be created to teach me humility. As a beginning tai chi student I was preoccupied with where to place my feet, how to move my arms and how to transfer weight from one foot to another through a series of movements that they called Cheng Man Ch'ing's Yang style. The first ten years of classes were outside in a park in southern California. Initially, it was all experiential, but after several years I began to read about tai chi, the classic principles and Taoist philosophy. This beginning phase lasted many years. It helped my body to become more relaxed and coordinated and taught me about relaxing my mind. I began to see tai chi as a pathway to follow that led indefinitely into the future.

As an intermediate student, my focus turned to skill development and I wanted to be more precise and accurate in my movements. I was interested in things like weight transfers, fluidity and what the words "substantial" and "insubstantial" really meant. The language of the Chinese masters fascinated me and I wondered exactly what those ancient teachers were trying to communicate through the classic principles. I pondered the meaning of expressions like "movement is rooted in the feet, issued by the legs, governed by the waist and expressed in the fingers". I could grasp a surface meaning to the words, but somehow couldn't get my body to internalize it or express it. Keep practicing, I was told by my teacher, for "all things are revealed with enough practice". Studying Taoist philosophy changed how I perceived life. The principles of tai chi were applicable to the physical body as an exercise and to the mind in developing strategies to cope with difficult situations. I enjoyed using tai chi concepts to make life easier at work. Yield to people when their minds are closed. Redirect the incoming energy of colleagues who are trying to control my behavior. Use softness during conflict. My experience as an intermediate student involved much reading and pondering about the words that referred to the internal depth of tai chi, along with hours of practice. My form during these years was basically an external expression, but I had a desire to become more internal.

As I look back over the last twenty years of my life, during which tai chi was my friend and teacher, I can see how tai chi has worked its magic by giving me a more flexible, coordinated body and a calmer, clearer mind. Practicing tai chi has helped me achieve a more integrated functioning of mind, body and spirit. I now believe that tai chi is teaching and cultivating the "Unity Principle" in the body and mind. Unity expresses on the physical level as more coordinated movement, greater fluidity and improved health. By practicing tai chi you improve the level of "structural functioning" in the body or "tensegrity". Communication between the mind and body is faster and more integrated. Energy pathways are more open and connected throughout the body. You become stronger and more unified physically. Unity is demonstrated on the mental level as "grace under pressure". It expresses as a calm, serene mind not easily uprooted into anger, anxiety or judgment. It is the person who can mentally

redirect the incoming force of strong personalities with expectations and demands of you by listening, calmly discussing and negotiating issues while staying true to self. Perception is enhanced and you are able to observe yourself during the form and during situations in life. The detached observer, cultivated in the mind, helps you to mentally see situations more clearly and thereby have an opportunity to choose how to respond.

You don't experience the unity principle mentally by thinking. Unity is accessed by tuning your mind to an awareness mode. You learn to feel your body, noticing the subtle changes, the flow of energy as you move and how to use intention to guide your tai chi movement. As you step back from the thinking mind into awareness, you are free to mentally observe yourself and others interact and see the bigger picture of the situation. From this expanded perspective you can free yourself from the tendency to be judgmental and begin to operate without an agenda from the ego. You learn to see from a perspective of unity that connects you with ways to harmonize and cooperate with others.

On the spiritual level, there has always been only unity. Glimpses of this emerge into your consciousness as tai chi teaches you how to participate in the stream of life, the endless flow of creative expression in the natural world by being in unity and resonating with the Tao. The Tao is the creative principle, the unifying force of nature, which expresses as endless change and movement. It is the motivating force behind the unfolding of the planets, the changing of the seasons and all expressions of nature including human life. Tai chi invites you to slow down, resonate with and pulse with the earth's energy to experience unity in the natural world.

The complexity of tai chi's art continues to reveal itself to you through your practice over the years. What tai chi looked like in the beginning, an exercise for the body and mind, grows with patience, practice and increased skill into more awareness of how to apply the underlying principles more deeply to the external form and to your life. As the mind and body begin to integrate with spirit, tai chi will show you how to harmonize with nature and experience the ever-present unity underlying life.

Throughout the years of practice, as your relationship with tai chi unfolds, the attitude of "beginner's mind" gives you a clean slate every day, to see, feel or learn something new and integrate that with what you have already experienced. This allows tai chi to teach you at a deeper level. You listen, feel and follow the thread of energy within your movements. You watch, observe and recognize how things are connected. No matter how many years I continue to learn and teach, I will always choose to be a beginner for there is always so much more to learn. I want to remain in "beginner's mind", because a beginner's mind is open to learning and experiencing and tai chi always has something more to teach me.

For more information about tai chi go to www.innerpathtaichi.com. Caroline teaches Sun Style Tai Chi classes in Chapel Hill, NC and Tai Chi instructor workshops around the country.