

# Learning How To Learn

*Or How To Stop Being A Perpetual T'ai Chi Beginner*

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After watching an exhibition or a class. Scandinavian students have often said, "I see that you can fight with T'ai Chi Ch'üan, but I just can't seem to do it. Is there something that you can tell me that can help?" After watching how they behave in class, and seeing how they train on their own, I could tell them the answer, but I usually do not. Because if I gave them the short answer they seem to expect, they would become offended. If I gave them a long answer, it would seem as though I was lecturing them, or behaving like an academician. So, over the years, I developed different, polite ways of hinting at the answer, without offending them. But very few really improve.

As a last resort, I am writing this article to help the students who have the *courage* to follow the advice it contains.

## **True Courage**

Though fighting takes courage, the courage to fight is nothing, compared to courage to face yourself and admit that your problem is most often not confined to T'ai Chi Ch'üan. The same reason that most people can not learn to fight with T'ai Chi is usually the same reason that they can not learn to do other things. Many think they can learn something new without experiencing great changes. Sometimes changing might mean adopting a radically different philosophy of life.

No matter which martial art one studies, the first opponent that you must face is yourself. This takes true courage, because it requires that you give up thinking of yourself as an opponent. In fact you must give up fighting yourself. Obviously, if you fight yourself you are bound to end up in a state of confusion, trying to figure out if you have won or if you have lost. And the confusion increases if you ask the simple question, what is there to be gained or lost by fighting myself? The answer to this question is different for T'ai Chi Ch'üan than it is for martial arts created by people who were not Taoists.

This is why even people who have been successful in learning other martial arts may fail to learn to fight with T'ai Chi Ch'üan because they can not accept the changes that T'ai Chi demands. For example.

## **The Spirit of The Art**

Two Black Belt instructors in Karate attended my classes in Uppsala for almost three years. Of course they were reasonably confident in their own ability to defend themselves. And learning the movements of the form was not at all difficult for them. But the spirit of the form escaped them totally.

They explained at the beginning that their primary reason for studying T'ai Chi Ch'üan was to gain the art of soft fluid movement. They failed, however, to realize that the soft fluid movements can not be copied from watching someone else, they must be generated by something inside, something that each person must discover for themselves, something that can neither be described nor explained.

I tried to tell them that the difference between the Taoist meditation demanded by T'ai Chi Ch'üan and the meditation required by Zen masters is that T'ai Chi requires continual change and movement. The stillness experienced by the advanced T'ai Chi student is not like the stillness of a quiet, dark cave. T'ai Chi stillness is like the stillness in the center of the eye of a terrible storm. It is this stillness that must generate the movement, like the stillness in the eye of a hurricane generates the destructive forces that control the spiral winds that swirl around it.

This is not the stillness of sleep. It is not the calmness of sitting on the floor and emptying the mind. It is an active flow like the gusts of wind and waves of the sea in a raging storm. But there is no anger. There is no intent to destroy. In fact, there is no purpose at all. There is only stillness in the center and spiral forces at the edges. It is this that generates movement.

The Karate students were sincere. Though they were not willing to give up their static stillness for the stillness of movement, they did become softer, and they did understand that they would never be able to move with the freeness of an advanced T'ai Chi Ch'üan student without first accepting dynamic stillness.

There are, however, some people who can attend classes without learning anything.

### **Determined Not To Learn**

After a few years of teaching I learned to recognize perpetual beginners the first day that they come to class. There is no special look, no specific background that sets these people apart from the other students, only the fact that they refuse to change. There are different styles of refusing to change.

The most difficult case is the person who shows extreme enthusiasm for T'ai Chi Ch'üan, talks about it, buys the books, takes notes in class, but refuses to move. They fail to realize that words can only point the direction. You have to *walk* on a long road to reach the destination. And walking is the most difficult aspect of T'ai Chi's self-defense. There is no substitute for hours, and hours of walking. But this student does not walk. Talking and writing and reading are their method of study. This works well in academic subjects. But a student who persists in trying to learn T'ai Chi Ch'üan by this method is doomed to be a perpetual beginner.

The next most difficult case is the fighter. They have learned to fight by other means and insist upon treating T'ai Chi as if it were simply a variation of the style they have studied. In class they eagerly demonstrate a punch, a lock, a throw from another art, never realizing that each time they do this, they are delaying their mastery of T'ai Chi techniques. Because they are not practicing T'ai Chi Ch'üan, they are practicing what they did before. Unless they discover their error, they too are doomed to be perpetual beginners in T'ai Chi Ch'üan.

Then there are the "tourists". These are the people who like to say, "I have been there. I have done that. And I got the tee shirt!" They wander from class to class, instructor to instructor, art to art. They are like students who decide to take the beginning courses in all of the subjects at a large university. They learn very little about a great deal. The breadth of their knowledge may be impressive. But as far as T'ai Chi Ch'üan is concerned, they are perpetual beginners.

An extremely difficult perpetual beginner is the fast learner. Some of these people can learn movements in half the time that it takes other students. Within a few months they can complete a whole form. Other students envy them. Their friends and acquaintances are very impressed by the movements. Even the teacher may be impressed by this student's early progress. Things change, when the student fails to feel the power generated by the movements, and when students who know fewer movements begin pushing the fast starter around in two handed exercises.

Fortunately for most instructors, this student usually quits before admitting that he or she is a perpetual beginner.

Unfortunately for some students, the fast learner may become an instructor. Having a perpetual beginner as an instructor is often only a delay for a potentially good student. Because it does not take long to learn the superficial aspects of a form. In

most cases, everything that the student has learned will probably have to be relearned. Most traditional masters of T'ai Chi Ch'üan would prefer that a student spend his time looking for a competent instructor, instead of learning incorrect postures and/or superficial movements from a perpetual beginner. But in practice, whether learning a superficial form first is better, or worst, depends upon the student, the form and the instructors. But the student must be on the lookout for another type of perpetual beginner often found among instructors, the philosopher.

Reading Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, *The I Ching*, and Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* can really help to understand the philosophy from which T'ai Chi Ch'üan was developed. What some students do not accept is the fact that the Art of T'ai Chi itself reached its peak development in the hands of illiterate, sweaty, old men, who practiced by knocking each other down in the privacy of closed rooms, walled gardens and hidden locations. Expecting them to be handicapped by not being able to read or write would be like expecting the Western World's Heavyweight Champion to be hampered by the fact that he never studied physics or Aristotle.

Like all other arts (not just martial arts!) knowledge of T'ai Chi Ch'üan is measured by what you can do. The philosopher runs the risk of becoming a perpetual beginner when he or she fails to understand the difference between *learning* T'ai Chi Ch'üan and *learning about* T'ai Chi Ch'üan.

### **What Is T'ai Chi Ch'üan?**

In the end, everything depends upon *your personal* answer to the question, What is T'ai Chi Ch'üan?

My chief instructor, Dr. William C.C. Hu, says that T'ai Chi Ch'üan is an art that has *the potential for being* used as a form of meditation, a form of physical therapy and a martial art. Failing to develop any one of these three potentials is bound to effect the student's performance in the others, because the potentials are all interconnected and dependent upon each other.

The first two potentials are inherited directly from Chi Gung, a series of movements and breathing exercises used to *avoid illness*. The Taoists, who were ancient China's medical doctors, used Tao Yin, a Chi Gung exercise, as the basis for the martial art that was later to become T'ai Chi Ch'üan. What perpetual beginners do not learn is that Chi Gung also helps to control fear, fatigue and pain, the three worst enemies of all martial artist.

### **Conquering Your Worst Enemies**

Fear paralyzes the muscles so that movement becomes stiff, slow and jerky. Fatigue can reduce concentration, destroy coordination and balance. Pain can make cowards out of people who may believe that they are brave. Many forget everything they have ever learned when pain dominates their thoughts.

Breathing and meditation from Chi Gung are the keys to conquering fear, fatigue and pain. So anyone interested in being able to use T'ai Chi as a self-defense will remain a perpetual beginner until they can learn to use its Chi Gung aspect to control these internal enemies, enemies that have to do with the self rather than any opponent. Mastering them is essential.

Movements performed with a knowledge of T'ai Chi Ch'üan's Chi Gung are economical, relaxed and very efficient. With these movements one can train, or if necessary, fight for hours with very little fatigue. The real advantages are really appreciated if one is old, sick or weak and are faced with young acrobatic opponents. The mental endurance necessary to sustain a martial artist in a long encounter is also often overlooked. Mental fatigue is worst than physical fatigue, because physical fatigue can sometimes be overcome by will power. In mental fatigue it is the will that becomes tired. And without the will, no T'ai Chi Ch'üan technique can be effective. The art of conquering your internal enemies is learned by practicing the Chi Gung

aspects of T'ai Chi. This skill must be combined with the self-defense techniques if one is to avoid becoming a perpetual beginner.

### Timing and Two Handed Exercises

The only one word answer that I can, with a clear conscience, give to T'ai Chi Ch'üan students who wish to learn self-defense is **timing**. As far as I am concerned, everything interesting about the art can be summed up with this word. Simply doing what you must, at the proper time is what martial arts is all about. Even here, you have to overcome yourself before you can effectively confront others. Once again, the Chi Gung aspects of T'ai Chi Ch'üan come into play, especially for making proper use of emotions.

One of the main reasons that people not trained in fighting arts lose to people skilled in martial arts is that untrained people fight emotionally. People who fight for no other reason except that they are angry, or drunk, usually make big mistakes that can finish them before they have hardly begun to fight. Skillful martial artists use their Chi Kung, not to suppress, but to make optimal their own emotions and exploit the emotions of opponents. They learn to wait patiently for opportunities to end a conflict, often avoiding it before a conflict has time to develop. There is no substitute for two handed exercises in practicing timing and emotional control. Here one encounters the greatest technical risks for remaining a perpetual beginner.

When someone asks me to criticize their two handed exercises, I often do not have to test them myself or see them push against another person. I just have to look, first at their eyes, then at their feet. Almost everything you need to know is there. What they do when they eventually push against another person usually confirms what I have already seen.

If they do not have it already, a person who spends a lot of time standing in a horse stance develops a look of strength and of purpose. This look is almost impossible to imitate. The position of the feet and the way a person balances is an even better sign of what to expect from them in combat. And watching them walk tells you almost anything that you want to know. One example.

An American student visited my Stockholm class. After watching the class a few minutes, he walked up to me and invited me to do two handed exercises with him. From his posture and the way he shifted his weight I could tell that this was a serious student, not likely to become a perpetual beginner. But he was totally unaware that coming to the class of a strange instructor and asking to do two handed exercise would be interpreted to mean that he was either an aggressive teacher wishing to establish himself in a new area by doing combat with the locals, or a very inexperienced beginner who was on a path to learn the unwritten rules of martial arts the hard way. He was the latter.

With five years of experience in the Chen school, some of them as an instructor, he was asking a Yang school instructor with over thirty years experience to do two handed exercises with him. Most instructors would have turned him over to an advanced student who would bounce him off the wall (or off the floor) a few times and laugh about it later. But I usually try to avoid getting my students into conflicts. So I politely asked him to sit and watch the class and ask questions after. But he did not take the hint.

After about half an hour he was back again with the same request, this time more urgent, because he was in a hurry. "OK," I said. "We'll do two handed exercises". His posture wasn't bad, for a student who had studied only five years. But it wasn't good enough to even start two handed exercises with an experienced T'ai Chi Ch'üanist. Rather than waste time I applied an advanced "covering" technique. He noticed, to his great surprise, that he could not move. He had only one of two choices. Stand still and look silly or quit and go home. He became very confused before he quit. His parting remark as he left was, "I never expected anything like that".

He was lucky to get away with breaking the unwritten rules about visiting training halls. My first experience visiting a Karate dojo in Minneapolis left a lasting impression, even though I followed all of the unwritten rules of the martial arts. I called the Shotokan Karate instructor and asked permission to *watch* his class. If you are a serious student of the martial arts, most instructors will not refuse such a request. He granted me permission, I watched the class, and was prepared to leave, when he asked me to show his class a T'ai Chi Ch'üan form. I did Cheng Man-Cheng's form. Like all Yang forms it is elegant, beautiful and totally unimpressive for people who do not know about T'ai Chi.

The instructor, a third grade black belt, said in front of his class of about thirty men, "This looks like a bunch of shit to me! I want you to put on a gi and give us a demonstration of how it works."

Somewhat surprised, I told him that I did not need any uniform. He sent his first student, the state champion. A student in theoretical physics, his student was brave but had no idea what he was up against. He attacked, I yielded to his force, and when he attempted to kick, I blocked his kick uprooted him with a technique from grasping the sparrows tail (*Lan Ch'iao Wei, An*) and he was immediately thrown several meters away.

Angered by his senior student's easy loss, the instructor made his attempt. He had seen what T'ai Chi could do. So he was more skillful and more careful than his student. He used a complex attack that started with his fist and ended with a kick. In the middle of his attempted kick a light touch with the index finger struck his private parts, with Needle at the bottom of the sea (*Hai Ti Lao Chen*). He was not seriously hurt. Still, it took about five minutes before he could stand and walk.

### Testing Against Different Styles

Later I learned that he was enemies with most of the other instructors in the area. After what happened to him, the other instructors became my friends. We met on Saturdays, instructors and advanced students, to discuss and try out techniques against our different styles.

Saturday afternoons, for four years, against thirteen black belts in Japanese, Korean and Chinese styles, and their students, Doctor Hu's T'ai Chi Ch'üan was never defeated, because Dr. Hu taught his students the most important principle about using T'ai Chi as a martial art. The principle, *Never do anything yourself*. Let T'ai Chi Ch'üan do your fighting for you.

This is the most difficult thing to learn. You have to forget about yourself and let your art do everything for you. Until you can do this, you will remain a beginner forever. For some, it will take longer than others. Patience, care practice and a good instructor are absolutely necessary. But if you can avoid becoming a perpetual beginner. If you can continue to learn, what may be accomplished with this magnificent art is truly amazing.