

Milestones



REFLECTIONS OF A RETIRING SIFU

By Gloria Jenner

“T'ai Chi is an art of contradictions.

It is an art that develops one's ability to overcome others while removing the desire to do so.

It is an art that produces great power and strength, but is practiced by emphasizing no power and little strength.” (1)



Everything in our lives happens for a reason. My life direction took a turn in 1979 when I first saw T'ai Chi demonstrated and explained to me. To me it looked like Yoga in motion, and I said to myself, that is for me. And the journey began, looking for a teacher, to opening my own Centre in 1988, and now to retiring.

How can I retire from teaching T'ai Chi Ch'uan, as it has been part of my life-style since 1979? Retiring as the owner and Sifu of Phoenix T'ai Chi Centre took some consideration. When I found the right person to carry on the centre I felt that I could let go (of) the business part. I have had a long history of teaching T'ai Chi Ch'uan since 1982, and opening and running a T'ai Chi Centre since March of 1988. It is hard to reflect on retiring (from) teaching as I will always share my knowledge of this great



(1) Gordon Muir studied Yang style from Master T.T. Liang in 1982. His current teacher is Master Chen Zhonghua. He lives in Victoria, B.C., Canada.

discipline with others, but to reflect on no longer running a Centre which was my creation, I will always feel it has been a part of me in the years ahead, as I reflect back.

When I needed to choose a name for my Centre, I wanted a name and symbol that represented what I saw happening in students I was teaching then. The name Phoenix represents transformation.

'Celebration of Life through Movement' represents the moves of T'ai Chi. And the older yin/yang symbol represents fluidity. When I put this together as a logo, I said, 'yes, this will represent my Centre.' To completely retire and close down the Centre, my concern was what would happen to long-time participants, and teachers. But I really feel I can let go now of this concern as a very responsible and caring Teacher has stepped up to the job: Steven Holbert. I am so thankful to Steve that my future concern of the Centre will not be a worry.

It was also suggested that I reflect on my experience in teaching...

Looking back, in 1987, a T'ai Chi teacher from a Toronto club asked me, 'Do I not get bored with teaching beginners?' I said no, for beginner students help you to become a good teacher. As they do not know, as yet, what questions to ask, you tend to read them and how they are enjoying the movements or are they finding them stressful. You do your best to make them comfortable in their bodies. As everyone moves differently and our energies flow differently

they teach you this lesson right from the start, and you learn you cannot make clones of them, and you learn differences in body types, not only in movement but in how people learn. You find yourself describing the move in a different way to help those who do not get it the first way you break it down.

What does this teach me? To be more verbally creative and come up with different visualization(s) of the moves, to accept everyone is not like me. It also teaches me to be more flexible in the way I teach. And to remember I am dealing with adults in T'ai Chi classes, therefore, in giving corrections, I try not to insult their intelligence.



And what I noticed was that when students started opening their bodies, they began to open their minds to new probabilities in life.

Again, I mention that all the almost 30 years I have been teaching T'ai Chi I have never got bored teaching

basics and emphasizing the health benefits. I have always been enthusiastic about the health benefits I acquired from being a lover of this marvelous exercise that incorporates so many of the Chinese healing techniques. It always amazes me the layers and layers hidden in this beautiful internal art. How did the creators of this moving meditation know how to put in their Chinese Healing Arts, of Yin & Yang, I Ching, the meridian systems and their knowledge of how animals move and nature's seasons?

I have been fortunate over the years, to draw to our Centre, mainland Chinese Teachers of T'ai Chi and Qigong, and a Chinese Medical Doctor who taught us knowledge that had not been put in books in English as yet, and they teaching their styles, and they enjoyed learning our style. The 108 long Yang form was not being done in China at that time (2).

One of the most important things I learned teaching this slow-moving exercise was patience, something I never had before learning T'ai Chi.

Some Tai Chi Instructors say the breathing pattern is not important. I feel it is very important.

Coming from practicing Yoga before discovering Tai Chi, I share the breathing technique with students. I do not expect them to memorize it. But just to be aware of how the in and out breath goes so well with the rhythm of the yin and yang movements, especially with Yang style. There are some moves that get slurred into the next one without using a transition move and here is where the breathing helps the student to be aware of each movement and not to forget the transition movement, i.e. holding the

ball—which is an 'in' breath in our style.

In the beginning class I have students just standing with their hands on their abdomen and feel the deep breathing going on in their bodies. So again I do not try to teach beginners the breathing with each move, as they have a lot going on with remembering, hands, feet, and direction, but make them aware the breathing becomes important.

Intermediate students bring the joy of teaching T'ai Chi in a more focused way, as now you can refine their moves and begin to see how their practice has enhanced their T'ai Chi. You begin to hear the benefits they have received from playing this slow-moving form. Stronger ankles, knee pains gone, better posture, stronger lower back, and the most benefit I hear is their great balance.

One exercise we do in all classes is *toi yu*—shifting weight back and forth on (the) feet and the slow turning of the waist and hip, and incorporating arm movements. I ask them to go inside their bodies when doing this exercise and feel the gentle massaging of the ankles and knees and hips. I often wondered why doctors sent people with knee problems to T'ai Chi as the moves constantly use knee joints (which would be

(2) Note from Gloria: According to the Chinese teachers that ended up at my Centre in the 1980's and early 1990's, they told me that only the 24 set was done and this was set up by the Communist Government. So I taught them the 108 and they taught me the 24 set. Later, Chinese teachers that showed up did know a 108 and a complete Sun Style set, but were older teachers. That was information given to me at that time. ... I am quite sure in Hong Kong all forms were allowed, but these teachers came from mainland China.



painful to them) and when I began to pay attention to what was happening in my knees when doing this toi yu exercise, I noticed that instead of the knees going in a linear fashion, the knee is doing small circles when you do the exercise correctly. No wonder the knee joint gets stronger.

With intermediate students you start reading to them the T'ai Chi Classics and other articles and books to give deeper insight into the practice. Push Hands or Two-Person T'ai Chi is a great help to develop sensitivity in their moves and realizing the martial aspects.

Advance(d) students give you the challenge of teaching them other sets once they are comfortable with the first set. Other sets are now easier for

them to learn, as they have one set under their belts and recognize various moves in other sets. It also gives you the benefit of keeping your various sets up-to-date with practice. It is like having your cup full and now you can let it flow out and share this knowledge. You begin to notice the advanced students have developed some of their own way of doing moves. The student has discovered their own rhythm.

Teaching classes also in the community I have noticed various groups learn fairly well while others do not even have a sense of their own bodies. Give this second group simpler moves so they feel they are accomplishing something. Talking about simpler moves, over the years teaching MS and Parkinson students I often create a small set with no turns, so they won't lose their balance and get scared of doing any exercise.

The question sometimes comes up should you use background music. My first teaching job in 1982, I was asked to use music in this community class. What I discovered in using music compared to classes where I did not use music, was the students being taught with slow music picked up the idea quicker of one movement flowing into another—this was not a stop-and-start exercise.

Even after this many years of playing T'ai Chi Ch'uan, it always blows my mind when I discover another layer of this exercise, saying to myself, 'That is why the 'Father' of T'ai Chi created the move this way.'

So, my almost 32-year T'ai Chi journey has been a fantastic experience and I am so glad that in the beginning I kept being gently pushed in its direction. Doors just kept opening up. Knowing so many people in the healing community at that time, it was so easy to share this new concept with them

Over the years, I have touched so many lives and heard their stories. What a wonderful way to learn about life: sharing and listening. We are on this Earth plane to learn, and how do we learn? Through relationships.

And can you tell me what other exercise subtly strengthens one's ankles and lower back, helps you to feel what is happening inside you, and develops a sensing of Chi? Amazing. And I agree with Laurence Galante who calls it the "Supreme Ultimate".



So what more can I share with you about retiring?

Giving up responsibility is one thing, but I intend to continue playing this supreme internal art as it will be so important in keeping me healthy, with good balance, serenity, and the joy of knowing I am practicing an ongoing art that keeps giving back to me all its benefits.

About the author

Gloria Jenner has been teaching T'ai Chi since 1982. Gloria and her staff teach Yang Style T'ai Chi, T'ai Chi Sword and Qigong.

Gloria has studied under many T'ai Chi and Qigong teachers and masters including: Ken Baldwin, Master Moy, Chang Cheung, Sifu Paul McCaghey, Ai Min, Master Mantak Chia, TCM Dr. P. Liang, Qigong Master Guo Yi, Benhuang Gong and Yingchiang Song. Gloria has also completed workshops with Dr. John Painter, Sam Masich, Master Jim Carrothers and Master Yan Wu.

Gloria's teaching focuses on the health improvement and stress reduction aspects of T'ai Chi and Qigong.

At its annual Open House on June 4, 2005, the Canadian Taijiquan Federation recognized Gloria's long-term service by honouring her with Elder membership status. (See picture of presentation on page 15; Roseann MacKaye is the presenter; CTF BoD seated in the background). Gloria is also a past Director and Treasurer of the CTF.

In Memory of Grandmaster Feng (1928-2012)

By Matt Kabat

養



This article was originally published in vol. 6, issue 2 (July 2012 edition) of the Center for Taiji & Qigong Studies quarterly newsletter, and we thank them for their permission to republish it here and to share their experience with the legendary Feng Zhi-Qiang. You may register to receive their free newsletter from Dr. Yang Yang's center at his website: <http://centerfortaiji.com/contact/signup.html> .