



Tai Chi Newsletter

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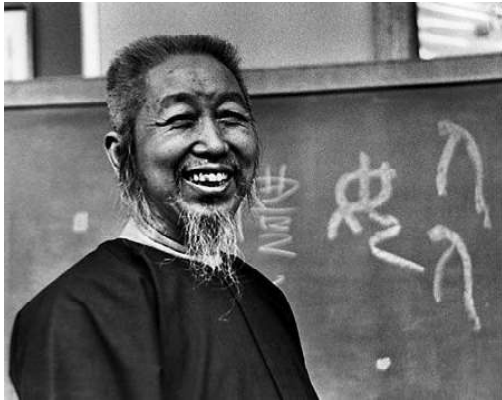


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Invest in loss, what's it all about?

I was recently reading and involved in a thread on this topic in the Cheng Man Ching Forum and thought it worth sharing some thoughts and ideas.

Invest in loss, sometimes translated as eat bitter, is an often-contended translation of Prof Cheng's writings. Here are two extracts from books in English:

Now when I say, "suffer and lose," who is willing to do this? To suffer and lose is to permit others to use force (What kind of Force - organized strength or brute resistance?) to attack while you don't use even the slightest force (We are talking resistance here) to defend yourself. (Doing such could cause the stronger player to get the upper hand) On the contrary, you lead (timing and space) an opponent's force away so that it is useless. Then when you counter, any opponent will be thrown out a great distance. The Classics refer to this as "tung chin" (understanding strength) and say: "After you understand the chin, (organized strength/force) the more practice, the more skill. · When you can enact whatever you think, you will then obtain the greatest benefit. This is the subtlety and application of Tai Chi Chuan and it conforms to the principle of the [philosophical] Tai Chi. – Cheng Man-ching, "Cheng Tzu's Thirteen Treatises on Tai Chi Chuan", 22

You are right, there is a secret. But it is so simple as to be unbelievable. Its nature insists that you believe that you have faith; otherwise you will fail. The secret is simply this: you must relax your body (Question: how do you relax -sung and where do you start?) and mind totally. You must be prepared to accept defeat repeatedly and for a long period; you must "suffer losses" - otherwise you will never succeed. I succeeded to my present state because I pushed pride aside and believed my master's words. I relaxed (again this needs to be explained) my body and stilled my mind so that only ch'i flowing (what is chi flowing? and what does it feel like) at the command of my mind. Initially this brought many bruises and defeats. In fact, in some matches I was pushed so hard that I lost consciousness. But I persisted. I followed my teacher by listening to and

heeding my ch'i. In crushing defeat, I forgot anxiety, pride, and ego. By emptying myself I gave the full field to ch'i. Gradually my technique improved. Then, and then only did my responses sharpen so that neutralizing and countering were the work of a moment. – Cheng Man-ch'ing & Robert W. Smith, "Tai Chi - The Supreme Ultimate Exercise for Health, Sport, and Self-Defence", 101

As Prof Cheng explains in 13 Treatises, "To invest in loss is to permit others to use force to attack while you don't use even the slightest force (what is force?) to defend yourself" (13T, Lo/Inn, pg22). This concept echoes the fourth and fifth lines of the Song of Hitting Hands (this is San Shou), "Let him come and hit with great strength. Draw-in and touch, 4 ounces deflects 1,000 pounds". The meaning of "invest in loss", is *play by the rules*, using no speed or strength, in order to learn how to turn the losing situation around using Ti Fang.

As Robert Smith wrote it in Masters & Methods: "Cheng said that he left the secret of Tai-chi out of his [13 Treatises].... It was simply this: never put more than 4 ounces of energy on your opponent and never let him put more than 4 ounces on you.... If this is followed, Cheng said, mastery will come. Few follow it." - Chinese Boxing, R. W. Smith, Pg 31.

In my experience anyone who I have trained with who meets force with force has failed to develop an ability to listen "energetically", and "attract to emptiness" to learn how to effectively yield and neutralize force. Ultimately it has to do with the relaxation principle. Ben Lo has been quoted as saying "You will not understand it if I explain it, but when you experience it, you will know. Until then, more practice, more relax".

I didn't say it was easy, any kind of learning stretches us and can feel very uncomfortable. But reliance on strength and technique is against the underlying principle of Tai Chi Chuan. For me, "invest in loss" means at the point of resistance release let go and relax. Pushing hands is the place to test it the easiest (most obvious). From there you can look to more dynamic (moving) martial practice, and maybe most surprisingly look for it in your solo form practice.

Prof Cheng has been quoted as saying "Form without function is no form at all"; that doesn't just mean martial application, it means functional movement for daily living.

It's time to move past just having a lovely looking Tai Chi form, and to build a greater mindful sense of connection, balance and flow.

Students & Teachers



Often when I speak to teachers they say “I don’t understand why people start tai chi then leave so quickly before making any real progress. Maybe it’s too hard for them or I’m scaring them off by expecting too much of them”. Truth is this is an age-old problem that has increased in our modern instant world. In pre internet domination days (pre 2000’s) people sort something out and the effort taken transferred to commitment given; now people YouTube for instant info’ so often given the same level of commitment to training in tai chi. Our role is to match experience to expectation so new people are hooked before they know it, then hopefully commit to deeper study. I thought I’d share an article by an old friend to show this is not a new thing.

In the early 60’s I studied at the Taipei Koushu Federation in Taiwan. My teacher Mr. Ch’en Mei Shou was keen to teach his five element Hsing-I, but put us through 3 months of general Koushu forms first. He liked to linger with us over a pot of soup, feathers still on the chicken, and offer some reflections. One evening he shook his head back and forth and said, “I am really not teaching in the right way! If I was teaching in the right way I would teach the rooting first, but then all the students would run away. First, I have to know your character!” Twenty Five years later I was visiting Ben Lo’s class at the Clement Street School. That evening was the second session of a new beginning class. It was the middle of the winter and not many students came. Ben turned to me and said, “I have to ease up. I have already eased up. If I teach the way I used to teach, all the students will run away.”

A few years later at one of the camps, Ben invited Marshall Ho as a visiting guest Master. Ben Lo and Abraham put on quite a show. Abraham and a student (Bill Helm maybe) did what he called his “A&B” form (san shou), which he apologized for, saying that it was a “smuggled form,” not really one derived from Professor Cheng’s teachings. Then it was Marshall Ho’s turn to perform, but Marshall was relatively new to T’ai Chi and he did not have the demonstrable soulful form that Ben and Abraham had demonstrated. He spoke before he demonstrated saying something to this effect: You are all very fortunate to have such great accomplished Masters to study with. Their form shows the highest level of t’ai chi practice. I do not have such fine form to show you. I have not studied so intensely. I only began to learn t’ai chi when I was an older person, but I am teaching many students. “I must say I believe a little bit of t’ai chi is good for everyone!”



The Master struggles to make his teaching method and art adaptable to the times that we live in.

Gregg expressed his appreciation for the time that he shared during his recent visit with me and my students. The visit raised questions for him. What do you do once you have made a significant investment in the basics to achieve a higher level of demonstrable skill in the push-hands? We have to consider the teacher-student relationship and also the potential to develop your art with a practice partner of your choice.

There is a big difference between how I relate as a teacher to a student who has only recently gotten a hunch that they would like to try a little t’ai chi and a more advanced student. New students may not yet know what t’ai chi is. For a hundred students heading into the form for the first time, maybe one will continue to practice.

Then there is the student who’s interest in tai chi has already matured. He or she has read a good deal of the literature, completed the basic form, and now expresses some enthusiasm about further cultivations. The teacher has to sense that there is mutual respect. The teacher is looking for students that he or she can teach full heatedly. But when is the right time for some extra work, details and shared insight? How much time do you have? Does your t’ai chi interest- maturity permit you to recognize the opportunity that a teacher offers you? What kind of opportunity are you looking for?

Teaching is not just about more basics. Teaching is about SPECIAL KNOWLEDGE. Where do you get this special knowledge? I am thinking about your concerns, Gregg, and I suspect this is what you are inquiring about.

T’ai Chi is an art. Each artist has his own taste. We choose from the elements that come to our attention in this great debate and in our personal experience. Push-hands leaves plenty of room for impulse, eccentric timing and creative solutions. Some recognize classical lessons in a personal way that make those specific lessons their basics by choice. “...the spirit rising from the bottom of the spine—which is kept ram-rod straight and in a plumb erect position...,” for example.

That form correction does in fact carry over into the push-hands is basic, foolish to argue with fundamentally, but subject to myriad interpretations. The feeling of buoyancy, the possibility of tilting the pelvis, a momentary rise or fall, is also part of the push-hands art. How do you weigh each stated principle relative to another? When is one idea more urgent than another? When must you suck to your root dead-nuts on—this is all part of the special knowledge that you go about collecting. Having stored experience in silence over many years a teacher may then be able to articulate points that have become cognitive to him or her, maybe not. But you have to be able to feel what the teacher is doing. You have to have access to higher level practice. There has to be a spirit to spirit investment, teacher to student, student to teacher, student to student. This takes a significant investment in time and it is a learning path that cannot be embarked upon without matured interest and mutual respect.

Students come and visit my classes in Seattle from time to time. They have come from cities in China, from Taipei—ah but mostly from California! From the perspective that I have as a teacher I can tell you that I always feel that I never get enough one on one time with anyone. People are way too committed and busy when they travel to visit classes. Modern life.

Take a look at this response that I received yesterday from an old student who I invited for some extra practice in the park during his proposed visit to Seattle: “I don’t know if your suggestion was for you and me and perhaps Pam or if you might still lead practice if there were six of us. Tim, Pam’s oldest, lives in Seattle, and has the baby for Saturday. Mary Wong is full Chinese, lives in Seattle and met Pam on the internet, then subsequently met Tim. All expressed interest. Lotta options. Anything goes. I’ll be in touch.” A second email arrived a day later altering the plans to invite me to dinner instead. The times given were exactly the times that I told them in advance that I had a regular scheduled t’ai chi class which defacto they have already talked themselves out of. I get used to it. I certainly am not going to miss my class!

There is some old Chinese etiquette advice: “Don’t leave the dinner table until after the older guests leave.” Now I am surely becoming one of the older guests and I am feeling that the younger guest are leaving too soon. When I first heard Martial Ho’s remark that a little bit of T’ai Chi is good for everyone, knowing our seriousness at the time, I protested. Now I can think of many people who would be better off with just that little bit. I have to sincerely ask myself if I am teaching in the right way. We each have few hours in which to choose our priorities. No blame. I can tell you though, that there are several students that I would really like to spend much more time with, but they have a million things to do.

My interest in the Push-hands is in either winning with ease, comfort and relatively soft light knowledgeable application, or when trapped, losing easily. I think panting and getting all worked up during push hands, trying to win every point, demonstrates nothing more than one’s own ineptness. This is the view that I hold dear. Someone else may have a different way of stating their personal goals.

by Saul Krotki



On Teaching

No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of our knowledge. The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness.

If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of HIS wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of YOUR OWN mind.

The astronomer may speak to you of his understanding of space, but he cannot give you HIS understanding.

The musician may sing to you of the rhythm which is in space, but he cannot GIVE you the ear which arrests the rhythm, nor the voice that echoes it.

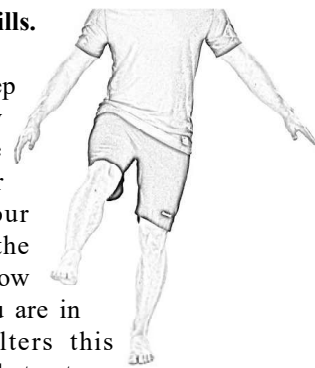
And he who is versed in the science of numbers can tell of the regions of weight and measure, but he cannot conduct YOU thither.

For the vision of one man lends not its wings to another man.

Taken from THE PROPHET by KAHLIL GIBRAN

Balance Comes from Many Skills.

We hear a lot about how to keep our heart and lungs healthy, how to have a ‘balanced diet’ but there is little mention of how to keep our balance system healthy. Your balance system includes all the senses in your body that tell you how you are moving and where you are in space, your brain which filters this information giving it values and structure, and the muscles that act to control your movements.



This complex system needs plenty of regular ‘practice’: As children we develop good balance by practising balancing activities - walking along walls, jumping, spinning, skipping and climbing.

As adults we tend not to give our balance system the practice it needs. A sedentary lifestyle, health problems, sensory impairment etc can also weaken this system. Even our multi-sensory stimulated world has an impact with focus more on phones and face-book than the real world around. The result is that our balance becomes potentially poorer.

Luckily you don’t have to do handstands to keep your system healthy, you just have to pay attention as balance is both physical and mental, and in fact is an active process not a static thing.

“A man walking is never in balance but always correcting for imbalance.”

- Gregory Bateson

Physical – For some reason I keep remembering maths/physics and calculating ‘the centre of mass of an irregular shaped body’. I guess you can’t get more irregular than human being! Luckily you can put your abacus away because the process is an experiential one whereby you will learn to calibrate sensory feedback. As balance is an activity (verb) the definition could be ‘To keep or put something or someone into a steady position so that it does not fall’; this is where my favourite saying comes into play, “the only thing you have to do in tai chi is to learn not to fall over”. Or if you prefer – learn to fall into balance not out of it!

Due to the nature of gravity, the only way for us to move is to fall so a more accurate term for falls prevention would be alignment with gravity. This is where sensory calibrations comes into play – how do you know you are aligning with gravity?

(1) muscles become sufficiently active to facilitate the movement process demanded

(2) structural alignment changes to correct for misalignment. The subtlety of change required is only honed through fine tuning (calibration) which is the true benefit of tai chi practice. As you hone your tai chi practice you fine-tune your interplay with gravity.

Mental – Quite the mind to be attentive of the present moment as it unfolds. Tai Chi is a mindful practice whether your focus is martial or health; each posture and each part of each posture

must be practiced attentively to ensure sensory calibration 'stillness in movement'. There is so much noise in the world today be this attack of another person or the attack of your own extraneous thoughts and actions; stillness and balance is the key. If gravity is the glue that holds the universe together, balance is the key that unlocks its secrets.

Tai Chi a balanced approach – Tai Chi solo forms enable us to hone (calibrate) our balance awareness and this awareness gets its challenge in push-hands where the aim is not to resist but to sense imbalance in ourselves and our partner. Gentle play allows for calibration, active play allows for testing. Push-hands is not about fighting others it's about not fighting yourself, to invest in loss (to eat bitter) and to look to hone further still; this is the wonder of tai chi chuan as your skills can always be sharper...

A body unbound from unnecessary tension is at liberty to respond to gravity with 'free' support from the ground upwards; to effortlessly 'inflate' in all directions with fluid stability and elastic movement potential



There is a bug that's rarely seen
That gives a serious bite.
It's got two heads, two tails, and two eyes
And it's half black and white.

There is no cure for the bite it gives.
The symptoms are a curse.
The more you learn about it
The symptoms just get worse.

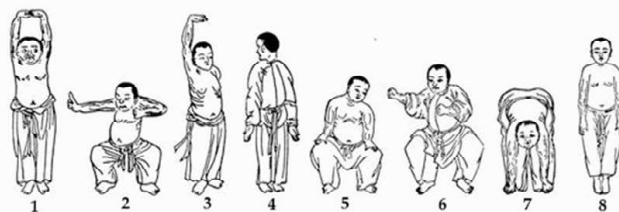
You can try to fight it
With a fan, a sword or a stick
But if you find you're travelling east
You really know you're sick!

Tigers and Swimming Dragons,
They'll haunt you through the night.
And Bears and Monkeys need all your wits
To ward off, left and right.

You'll find that you'll be standing
In a very funny form,
But the experts say 'Don't worry
This symptom is the norm.'

You'll hear 'plinky plonky' music
In your head so loud.
And your hands will suddenly float up and down
Just like a fluffy cloud.

So heed this warning that I give
Though it comes too late for me.
For I have been bitten very hard
By this bug they call TAI CHI



Ba Duan Jin – 8 strands of the Brocade

Qigong workshop 15th June 1-3pm live on zoom

The Eight strands (sections) of the Brocade have been attributed to one of the legendary Eight Immortals of Chinese folklore, Chong Li-quan. It is said to be one of the most practiced qigong sets worldwide.

There are a few slight variations, and the sequence is not fixed. It is merely a LIST of individual exercises that should be repeated 7 – 15 times. If you don't have time to do them all, pick one or two and practice them only.

It can be practiced seated or standing both as a relaxed set, and a stretch and strengthening set.

"Breathing in and out in various manners, spitting out the old and taking in the new, walking like a bear and stretching their neck like a bird to achieve longevity

this is what such practitioners of Dao-yin, cultivators of the body and all those searching for long life like Ancestor Peng, enjoy."

Chuang-tzu, Chapter 15, circa 300 BCE.

The workshop will be live on zoom for £35

Details and booking at shorturl.at/ijxJM

Advanced monthly training sessions.

Sessions are held each month for 3 hours at Weoley Hill Village Hall, Bournville, to enable instructors time for their own training and for more advanced students to gain the time to develop a deeper understanding of the application of tai chi chuan.

Sessions are Sunday's 9.30-12.30 at £30 per person.

Below are training dates for 2023

May 7th

June 11th

July 9th

Aug 13th

Sept 2nd & 3rd – annual weekend camp – 9.30am to 4.00pm

October 8th

Nov 5th

