



Tai Chi Newsletter

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Jenny & I would like to thank you for all the kind inquiries when we were ill with COVID. It was a stark reminder that it is still out there, so take care.

I would also like to thank my two chief instructors Neil Rankine & Heather Lomas for stepping in to cover my Sunday advanced class in March at short notice; they did a great job.

We would also like to thank all our instructors who gave us a wonderful surprise with a presentation to mark our 30 years as an Association.



Membership Update News

We have been making a number of cost savings in recent months and are pleased to update everyone on membership fees etc.

It will remain at £15 for all new first-year memberships and still include a FREE red club T-shirt. Renewals will be reduced to £10 from April 2024 and we're still able to keep T-shirt prices at £10 and hoodies at £25 for members.

Plus, the annual weekend camp in September will still be £20 cheaper for members at only £40 per day.

Students & Teachers

In the early 60's I [Saul Krotki] 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 he or she 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 t'ai 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.

Tai 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 can not 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 any one. 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 every one, 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.



I don't care for ritualized demonstrations. I need to enrich the basics and then move on to the special knowledge. I never play the role of dummy stand-in for a stunt man demo. I never ask my students to take a posture ready to be defeated. I will give

hours of toe to toe push-hands exposure to anyone who is mature enough and interested enough. Hopefully we will sit down together for an hour or so I can have a reasonable humane exchange with an interested student.

Were I to choose a teacher at this stage of my development, he or she would have to be the kind of person who would invite me stand in for an hour or so of push-hands. Otherwise I will arrange to meet a practice partner and we will get in a juicy two hour session. I don't need a teacher to tell me to just practice more basics.

(By way of analogy)

From the Yellow Emperor's Ling Shu:

"For every needling, the method is above all not to miss the rooting in the Spirits."

Some sort of metaphysics is involved.

Special knowledge in Tai Chi and in push-hands will not come easily.



What's in an Experience?

Experiential understanding is the understanding of truth anything else is apparent understanding. If I spend hours studying history I will may become a learned man. I will 'know' so much and yet I will not know the truth of any of the information because facts dates etc cannot give true experience of anything.

What is experienced can be related to others but the experience cannot be given. If we want to give somebody an experience then all we can do is give guidelines that relate to our own experience. An example a friend wants to learn to swim but is a little frightened. I am keen to help, I tell them how wonderful it is to glide though the water and that there is nothing to fear I want to give them the experience of swimming. I introduce them to water and then demonstrate how to swim. Whilst learning to swim my friend will experience a similar experience that I had while learning but it will not be the same experience and my experience whilst teaching my friend to swim is very different from my friend's experience of learning. I am relaxed and confident of my ability and safety, my friend is entering into a scary activity he has to put his trust in me and he will also feel self conscious and at times frustrated when he can't do it. With practice he improves and learns to swim he will develop his own way of swimming that suits him. If he becomes very keen on swimming he may go to a coach who will teach him how to improve his technique. My friend has learnt something of the truth of swimming. Another friend becomes very interested in swimming and having watched a swimming gala goes to the library and finds a book on Olympic swimming champions he reads it and becomes fascinated by the whole subject of swimming history. He furthers his reading learning all the secrets of the great coaches of swimming. He becomes an expert on swimming he knows so much about swimming.

The three of us sit watching a swimming race on TV my first friend and I are astounded by our friends knowledge we feel humbled as he explains how the winning swimmer has used a particular variation of a stroke to win the race. My first friend is eager to try this technique and asks our expert who confidently demonstrates the intricacies of the movement how the wrist and elbow turn with the hip etc. We suggest going swimming the next day so that we can test it in the water our friend the expert cannot make it, it seems he's allergic to water.

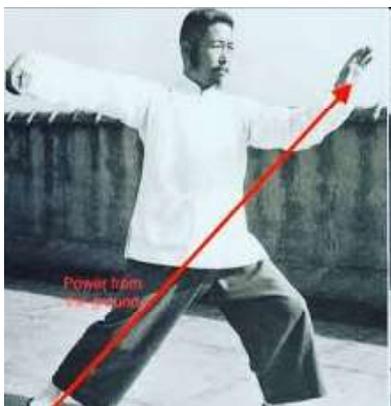


We can all become knowing without experience. I know the form because I learnt how to do somebody else's movements and copied them I received verbal instruction in order to understand what I should be feeling and I read books on the subject to further my understanding. My experience and exposure to different teachings has taught me to discriminate more clearly, to feel whether a position is physiologically correct rather than taking other peoples word for it. In push hands our experience of the activity can only be the truth of the moment however the nature of pushing hands means that while we may be practising the activity we are not really present with the truth of feeling.

If we are to really gain insight into our sensitivity then we have to access a subtler level of truth. This truth is that how we react in push hands may not be the truth in terms of developing martial ability. An example I push hands with a smaller lighter partner they start to push and I start to turn the waist to neutralize, my partners push is partially deflected he is now in a weaker position I then use a small amount of effort to complete the deflection and my partner is uprooted. I have failed to listen and invest in loss I have 'won'. I take this ability into a sparring situation and find I get hit a lot and can't work out why. The reason is that I am not prepared to experience being moved I cannot let my ego rest I have to find some immediate gain in what I am doing. In order to gain self defence skills from Tai Chi that is taught with the emphasis on developing these skills in push hands then you have change your perception of success. In a pushing hands competition two competitor's go hell for leather we see some spectacular skills one man seems on the brink of defeat about to be pushed out but with great determination and a strong root he stops and then uses his opponents desperate lunge to put him off balance the man flies through the air and there is great applause. We have seen a

champion of pushing hands at work. The same man enters a fighting competition he is punched senseless and cannot work out why. The skill that enabled him to root and manipulate his opponent out of an area had taught him to defend positions that cannot be defended when the dynamic of the activity changes. An arm that is trying to push you has a very different dynamic than one that is trying to punch you. This man's pushing hands did not inform his self defence skill. If we want to develop self defence skills from pushing hands then we must not manipulate our partner in order to stop them moving our centre we must develop the sensitivity to know (experience) when to enter and gain the upper hand through good structure and when to concede ground and withdraw in order to gain a better position. This knowledge alone would not prepare someone for a fighting competition. But if studied and practised honestly then a person will have developed some physical intelligence, which will enable them to avoid using brute strength. At this subtler level of truth one must continually ask the question am I truly feeling and responding to my partner or are other factors influencing my response. Is my status in the class such that I must win, at the other end of the spectrum of ego is my self esteem so low that I lose my structure and never gain the advantage, or I do I pride myself on some aspect of pushing hands such as yielding and so look only for opportunities to use this skill.

While evolving in the activity we may find that there are all sorts of reasons why we fail to pay proper attention and it is important not to become despondent about this or to judge yourself, this is self-cultivation, realising how your ego works not trying to suppress or ignore it. Practised correctly the practise of pushing hands can lead to a heightened understanding of and sensitivity to force, practised incorrectly it will lead to self delusion and the use of excessive force. Not only must you experience the activity but also you must be aware of how you achieved the result, if you cause your partner to be put off balance then be aware of whether you had to use force to achieve the result, when you use structure and a relaxed non-striving approach the feeling is very different.



Attention or intention?

There is a distinct difference between attention and intention in both life and martial arts.

From the dictionary:

Attention: Concentration of the mental powers upon an object; notice taken of someone or something.

Intention: Course of action that one plans on following.

From these definitions, it is obvious that attention takes place in the present, and intention concerns itself with the future. And yet, many people reverse them and get into trouble. In improv theatre, performers are trained to put their concentration on the present; to stay in the moment and work with the people around them. At the same time, they need to be clear on their intentions; they must have an idea of where the scene and action will go.

As we have previously seen, an improviser must be willing to let go of that intention when things change (and that point creates a new intention).

This unfortunate reversal happens often in life and martial arts. A person in an unpleasant situation will put their intention on the now and their attention on the future or even the past thereby getting caught up in "what if-ing" and they will use force to try to overcome rather than just being present and responding.

The most quoted line regarding Yi (intention) is in the Tai Chi Classic:

"All movements are motivated by intention (yi), not external form (li)",

which can also be translated as "use the mind, not force"; as in No.6 of Yang Cheng-Fu's ten important points, where he says: "Use the mind instead of force". (Use Yi not Li).

Remember, attention is where you are, and intention is where you are going.

The classics say "Release the jin like releasing the arrow. To fajin [discharge energy], sink, relax completely, and aim in one direction!"



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.

What3words locatoin <https://w3w.co/pits.level.cake>

Training in 2024 starts with

- 12th May
- 9th June
- 7th July
- 11th August
- 6th October
- 10th November

Weekend camp – 9.30am to 4pm
7th & 8th September

