

How Does One Teach T'ai Chi Philosophy?

By Rob LaPointe

"Do you teach the philosophy?"

T'ai Chi instructors will hear this question occasionally when someone calls for information about their school. It's an interesting question, and one I'm still not sure how best to answer.

In the course of studying T'ai Chi, students become familiar with the philosophical outlook associated with the Eastern disciplines, and with Taoism in particular.

Over time, through reading, discussing, observing, they gain some knowledge of the Tao Teh Ching and its influence on T'ai Chi, but that's not really active teaching, it's passive teaching—creating a space where students can acquire knowledge through contact with a training culture.

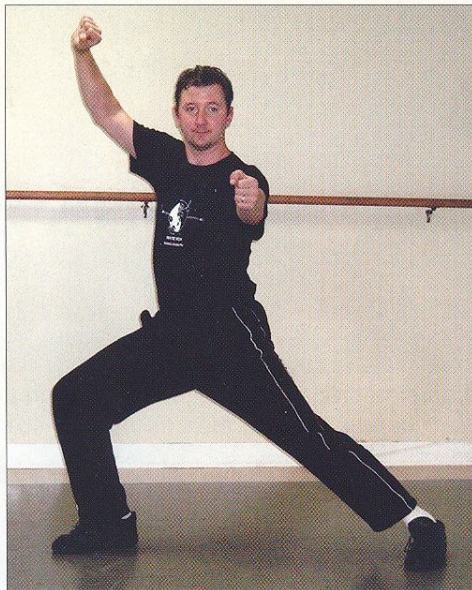
So again, do you teach the philosophy? How does one do that? Does the teacher stand in front of the class and hold forth? Does he initiate Socratic dialogue? Does he set reading requirements?

A teacher can do any and all of those things . . . or none of them, and in due course produce students who have a fair understanding of both the physical and philosophical components of T'ai Chi, and of their interaction.

He will also lose a few, or fail to satisfy some of those callers who ask about instruction in the philosophy. The reason he may lose them is that people who ask that question often have their minds made up about what the philosophy of T'ai Chi is and how it should be taught.

The one or two potential students who are lost because we don't "teach the philosophy" in the way they think it should be taught—or think they think—shouldn't concern us too deeply, any more than we should worry about students moving on because their interest and focus have shifted.

What's important is that as instructors we develop some method which both we and our students are comfort-



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able with, and which meets the specific interests of those students searching for physical training with a philosophical element.

I asked Pat Rice, founder of A Taste of China, about this. She agreed that T'ai Chi philosophy should definitely be part of T'ai Chi instruction:

"You must incorporate the philosophical concepts of Taiji into your Taijiquan. How else could you do 'real' Taijiquan? Likewise regarding the "quan" part, but that's another day's discussion."

The next subject, of course, is how you go about incorporating the T'ai Chi concepts into your practice and into your life, whether you're a teacher or a student, whether you're in class or in the car or kitchen or office. No wonder T'ai Chi Ch'uan is a lifelong study—it takes at least that long to gain some understanding, to experience that blending of mind-body, philosophical-practical, spiritual-physical, the essential aspects of life. And thereby to understand T'ai Chi Ch'uan.

Again though, bear in mind that before an instructor can settle on a method of introducing the philosophy, he must first decide exactly what that philosophy is.

Is it the Taoism of the Tao Teh Ching? Are there Buddhist elements? Is it a martial philosophy deriving from a martial art? Perhaps it's all of these

things.

And a few further questions. What is it to us here, now, today, and what was it originally? Are the two different?

T'ai Chi as practiced today, experienced its principal development during the mid-1800s, a time when China was occupied by the Manchu's and increasingly threatened by the West.

This was an unusual—even perplexing—period in their nation's history for the Chinese people to put time and energy into creating a new, empty hand method of combat. After all, why develop a martial art when cannons and guns are dominating the battlefield?

In his book "Lost T'ai-Chi Classics from the Late Ch'ing Dynasty," Douglas Wile proposes that Chinese society in the mid-1800s was in turmoil, and deeply conflicted.

Not only was China under siege militarily and economically, but culturally as well. Chinese students were traveling abroad to study in Europe and the United States, Western missionaries set up schools in China, and "gunboat diplomacy" set the tone for international relations.

Against this backdrop, the Confucian/Taoist paradigm of traditional Chinese culture was being challenged, and in a sense critiqued, by the apparent successes—militarily, economically, and culturally—of Western pragmatism.

The Confucian elements of the culture of the time required social action. The Taoist elements urged cultivation of the self. The development of T'ai Chi offered outlet for both.

Wile writes: "The times demanded that men of learning not only serve society but save the nation. T'ai Chi may have allowed them to satisfy Taoist yearnings for self-cultivation without withdrawing to the mountains."¹

Personal defense was still important. So was satisfying the Confucian imperative to act, yet—as Chinese—to act in a way that was internally Taoist. This made the art very much a product of a China in turmoil, yet a China striving for balance and reconciliation.

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In some ways, i.e., the elements of physical action and self-improvement, this could be said of any martial art in any time and place. It is, however, T'ai Chi's explicit emphasis on softness, yielding and synthesis that allow Wile's argument to stand on its own.

After all, the China of the mid-1800s was a China that was, in nearly all arenas of consequence, beaten or nearly beaten, and thus forced to accommodate both the West and the Empire of Japan.

Seen in this light, a martial art that emphasized "yielding" would be timely to say the least. But within that yielding, there is a distinctly Chinese core that obeys the Confucian and Taoist imperatives of action and self-cultivation.

Further, after the anti-foreign uprisings of 1919, T'ai Chi was commonly credited with being a discipline that could strengthen both the state and the individual. 2

It would appear that by then the Confucian gentleman and the Taoist sage had been fully acknowledged.

If T'ai Chi was designed specifically to meet the needs of a Chinese people and culture under assault by providing a discipline with a uniquely Chinese character, how can it be relevant to modern, Western students? There is simply no need right now for a martial art stressing nationalist values.

The answer is that T'ai Chi performs very nicely by meeting other needs which, though different in context and degree, are every bit as germane to the modern Western student as they were to the founders of the art.

The focus of T'ai Chi, both culturally, philosophically and physically, was on resolving tension. This can be the tension between the Confucian need to act externally, and the Taoist need to cultivate the inner self. Or, alternatively, it can be the tension between the individual and the larger world.

Jou, Tsung Hwa, in "The Tao Of Tai-Chi Chuan" writes:

"Patriotism teaches a citizen to identify with a country; many religions teach their followers to identify with God. These ways of identification still retain two entities, an individual and his or her country, or an individual and

God. The identification in the Tai-Chi philosophy eliminates dualism."³

Jou proposes that by seeing Yin and Yang as being unable to exist without the other we learn a general lesson about the reconciliation of opposites in the world around us.

The need to do this exists now as much as ever. As teachers, part of our job is to show our students how the practice of T'ai Chi can help them resolve the many tensions, including that of outward action and inward reflection, which are central to the Yin and Yang of daily life.

In practical terms, how do we, as teachers, do this?

Well, as mentioned above, in joining a School, the students have come into contact with a culture that exposes them to an outlook. Also, they read, discuss and observe.

Simply by practicing the physical art of T'ai Chi, students gain an understanding of the principles of the art. These principles include yielding, following and listening to their partner's intention. With a little guidance from the teacher, the students can come to understand these principles as metaphors for action/inaction in daily life.

If, as teachers, we want to go beyond physical metaphor and introduce the philosophy of T'ai Chi directly into the class lesson plan, there are ways we can do this.

As a teacher, I've tried to give the students some insight into the philosophy of T'ai Chi by having a "Thought for the Week" on a wax board in the workout area. These thoughts come from the "Tao Teh Ching," or the writings of the Zen poets, or Western philosophers, or Anonymous himself.

Sometimes, at the end of class, I'll ask what the thought for the week means and the students will answer. In this way, I avoid preaching, I get to hear the student's ideas so I learn something, and I help the students think a bit.

Whether the quote being discussed comes from Lao Tzu or Aristotle does not really matter, so long as we make use of it in resolving the tensions we encounter in our training and in our lives.

Further, these discussions are only a small part of our education in T'ai

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Chi's philosophy. Indeed, reading and discussing won't teach the philosophy at all, because those students who come to understand the philosophy of T'ai Chi don't come to this understanding by simply reading a wax board in the workout area.

They come to it by working out in the workout area. But that workout must be informed by awareness of the history, origins, goals and uses of T'ai Chi.

The lesson of China during the second half of the 18th century pertains today, and we would do well as teachers to help our students understand this. By cultivating our minds and bodies, we prepare ourselves for positive action in the world outside the training hall.

If discussing quotes encourages students to workout, or to not quit, or to think more deeply into their activity, then that's a good thing, but, ultimately, the philosophy of T'ai Chi can't be taught.

It can only be learned, and it's learned through experience.

1. Wile, Douglas, *Lost T'ai-chi Classics from the late Ch'ing Dynasty*; State University of New York Press, 1996.

2. Hsu Lung-huo, *Introduction to T'ai-Chi Chuan*; Taipai: Hua-lien ch'u-pan—she, 1982. First published 1921.

3. Jou, Tsung Hwa. *The Tao of Tai Chi-Chi Chuan*, Tai Chi Foundation, Warwick, New York. First printing 1981. •