

Natural Growth

I was once asked by a new student, "I need to learn Taiji as soon as possible to improve my health, so how can I progress more quickly?"

The following is based on an article first written in 2002 in response to this question.

An over-view

In order for an acorn to grow it needs the right conditions - earth, water, temperature, light.

The acorn can only know the earth in which it held. Once it germinates and breaks the surface of the soil, a whole new world opens to it as it reaches for the Sun. The whole environment now nourishes it - the earth holding and supporting, giving it nutrients; the atmosphere giving rain and wind; the Sun, from thousands of miles away giving light and warmth.

In order for our Taiji ability/skill to grow it needs the right conditions - good teaching, conscious practice, right timing, intention.

Our awareness begins with the body. When we have explored its connections and movement "body as one unit", we are ready to explore the mind, the intention. Beyond this lies the Spirit which drives all of life to live itself to its fullness.

Earth: Quality of Teaching

When you set out to learn a new skill, whether it's a new language, painting, Taiji, the better your teacher understands their subject the better your chances of laying a good foundation. A good teacher can save you years of struggle. A teacher will have been through the process of being taught, finding their own inner teacher, and is able to share their understanding simply and clearly. This experience will have taken time and effort. A teacher has learned from their mistakes and can help you avoid some of them, thereby allowing you to "get it" much more quickly (this doesn't mean in a few seconds, although instant enlightenment can happen). What took your teacher 10 years may only take you 2 or 3 years to feel, understand and embody.

The quality of the teaching is the nourishing ground from which you can grow.

Water: Conscious Practice

An acorn cannot grow without regular watering; not enough and it will wither, too much and it will rot. Skill does not develop without regular practise. Practise has to be conscious or it becomes a mechanical "going through the motions" which can, at best, keep you at the same level. The consciousness of practise takes you to deeper levels of understanding through feeling how each detail of a movement is part of the larger whole: where it fits, how it affects the rest of the whole. This includes the mind and emotions as well

as the physical body. Learning Forms for their own sake has limited use in daily life. To make your practice useful, to give it meaning and purpose, it needs to include the application of the principles into everything you do.

Temperature: Right Timing

In the cycle of the seasons there are times when growth and expansion are natural - in the fullness of spring and the warmth of summer. At other times rest and the gathering in of energy is required. An acorn cannot grow branches until it has grown roots.

In your learning process it is not helpful to try practising advanced techniques or principles before you are ready; before you have a foundation of understanding (physical and mental) that will support them.

Light: Intention

When the seedling breaks through the surface of the earth into the light it begins a new stage in its development. The light gives it a new form of nourishment and direction. It now takes the energy of the sun in through its newly forming leaves.

In our learning process, if the Short Form is seen as the beginning where the foundations/roots are laid, the natural development into Long Form takes us to the use of the mind or intention. This new area of awareness and intention can only be put to good use if there are strong roots ("body as one unit") to support them. The intention and awareness shed new light on the sensations we feel in the body at a more subtle level. This we call the energy body. We no longer practise moving limbs and placing them in the "correct" position, rather we use intention to create the shape which moves the energy which in turn moves the physical

body to its inevitable conclusion - an effortless and full posture.

Have you tasted fruit which is forced to grow and ripen - it may look good on the outside but lacks flavour. If you are in a hurry to perfect the outer form it too will lack flavour, it will have no depth, no life.

We cannot make an acorn grow faster than it is able. It needs to grow at its own pace from the inside. How an oak tree appears on the outside comes from its heart, the original acorn within. As students we express our Form from our hearts - the clarity of our intention, the time spent in practise, our depth of understanding and the care of our teachers.

The journey of practise is its own goal - simply stay on the path. Progress is inevitable and it takes as long as it takes.

So enjoy the journey, the goals will be attained in their natural timing and no amount of striving will get you there any faster.