

Practice –

The Pleasure and the Pain

Have you ever found it difficult to practise Taiji? If so, you are in good company.

At some point in the learning process practice can become a chore, a bore, too difficult, too time consuming, etc.

If you haven't reached this point yet, congratulations! If you have reached this point and are still here, even greater congratulations!

When learning a new skill the majority of people want to go straight from beginner to expert without the effort of continuous repetition; without putting in the discipline and time over weeks, months and years. It is only human to look for short cuts especially when we see others doing the thing we want to achieve with such apparent effortless ease. Even though we know there are really no short cuts, it doesn't stop us hoping that if we just wait long enough, some miraculous transformation will take place without us having to change any thought or behaviour patterns. Whilst caught in that mind set of wanting the end result now, when it comes to Taiji, we have completely missed the point as there is no end result, no ultimate goal "out there". It is this mind set that says you are not as good, not as flexible, not as co-ordinated as "those experts" that stops you succeeding. It doesn't allow or give any value to how good, flexible or co-ordinated you already are right now. That mind focuses on what you can't do, rather than the reality of what you can do.

The good news is you don't have to wait to become an expert in order to gain benefit. The effects start from the very first class. Wherever you are in your Taiji journey, however far along the path, you are already practising Taiji; from the first time you stood in the Attention posture you became a Taiji player.

Discipline

For most of us the word Discipline is something that means hard work, effort, force and control. That is a very Yang definition which implies "have to", and immediately engages a rebellious reaction in many people.

For me the most successful way I have found to create a sense of disciplined practice (by this I mean "Formal" practice), where I am going to move through Forms or exercises, is to find the right time. This has two aspects, firstly, discovering the best time of day that is least likely to be disrupted. Secondly, it has to include

flexibility so it can be moved to a different time if needed and that there is no fixed length. In other words, I set aside a manageable length of time but I don't have to fill it all. This releases some of the pressure of "have to".

Of course there are days when I just can't wait to go and do some practice. But there are plenty of days when it is easy to make excuses, there seems to be more important things to do. At these times, invitation is vital. If I am invited to something I feel welcome, wanted. So I invite myself into the Attention posture. And that is all. It is a very small thing to ask and easily accomplished. Once there, I can rest for a few moments to align and connect myself, and to feel if that is enough for today. Occasionally, when life is very hectic, that is enough and I can take that connectivity into the next thing that is demanding my attention. More often than not, however, I feel like moving onto the next posture and I keep inviting myself forward into each posture until I either reach the end of the Form, or the invitation loses its attraction and I stop at the end of the current posture.

Form (Formal) practice has its own joy and beauty, but as a beginner I did sometimes find it a chore, tiring, uninspiring. Now I see that those times were doorways (opportunities) to a deeper understanding – the chance to ask why was it a chore, tiring etc? At those moments in your practice ask yourself, "Exactly what are you practising"?

In the beginning the Form is there to give you a physical framework that is re-producible in order to act as a container for the body principles that help to align the structure, releasing and relaxing the body and mind, as well as freeing up and improving the flow of the energy system. As the sequence of this framework is learned the mind can pay more attention to the details of the alignments and principles such as empty step, vertical spine, shoulder/hip width step etc. and we can feel the benefits of the principles.

As we feel the effects of the principles becoming more and more embodied we begin to feel the benefit of them in daily life (Informal practice). This in turn creates other reasons to practice and keeps you on the path of self discovery.

Helpful questions to ask yourself:
What are you practising when you play Taij?
Who is it that is doing the practice?
Who are you practising for?