

## It's All Tai Chi

Sandan Essay: Suzette Hodnett

At The Gardens retirement village, my students are in wheelchairs and walkers. Some are unable to lift their arms to do parting the wild horses mane. Others sit unable to move at all, simply breathing in and out to my prompts.

At the Whittier Community Center, children with ADHD and autism do an abbreviated tai chi form. Their movements cough and sputter as they try their best to stay focused and go slow.

At the Day Away facility, Alzheimers patients find it difficult to face in the correct direction and follow along to a few moves that are forgotten several moments later.

At Presbyterian Hospital, even after three years of classes, students fumble through the form with wobbling stances and uncertain movements.

In a one-on-one life coach session with a 14 year-old girl, one moment she is grasping the bird's tail and the next moment she is crying over her deceased mother.

Fellow students and friends ask..."Are you really teaching tai chi when people can't use their legs, kids have such limited attention spans or when folks can't remember the moves week to week? What do you teach? Surely they aren't doing tai chi?"

As students in the dojo, we often cling to the "right" way to do a movement. It is easy to get attached to form and define tai chi by its exact postures. They can offer a measure of security and regularity in an uncertain world. And so we often freeze the form, losing that magical tension between spontaneity and precision. We embalm the moves and our tai chi form becomes a nailed down coffin.

Form is emptiness and emptiness form. To flow between form and no form, to me, is the highest skill in tai chi. Like a great improvisational jazz musician, to play with the form is to go deep into its essence and to allow oneself to express the true spirit of tai chi. This is the advanced work. This is my challenge as a Sandan - in my own form, but most especially with the students I am honored to teach.

To me, a good teacher is not necessarily someone who knows the rote moves. The tai chi form is a blueprint, a stepping stone. A good teacher is able to transmit the essence of tai chi no matter the student, how compromised their movement or how restless their mind. It is the "taught that creates the teaching." There can be no planned, prescribed lesson of the day. No certain way to do the movement. The child, the adult, or the senior citizen in my class shows me the way. Everything changes, moment to moment, as I teach. The tai chi form may be different from group to group, young to old, but my goal is always to have the spirit and essence of tai chi emerge in each setting.

My greatest challenge as a teacher is to be tai chi - open to change, centered and rooted. With a group of fidgety kids, I must have a strong, calm center that makes space for their hyperactivity. I try to make the tai chi principles accessible and fun. With the infirmed, I let go of any need for perfection of movement. My own chi must be contagious and infect them with the joy of movement, the preciousness of the moment and the inspiration of the breath. In all of my teaching, my learning edge is to remember that my students are teaching me and that ultimately I am always teaching myself.

Teaching allows me to rediscover the form, time and time again. Teaching requires great patience and humility. It asks that I find the lesson in the most challenging student. Sometimes silence and an example of calm and center teach the most. "I try best" and learn as I go.

How do I know I am teaching Tai Chi? When I watch a child with ADHD is in his "tai chi warrior stance", softly looking forward, calm and focused. When the most restless student shares that he used tai chi to calm himself before a test and when someone picked a fight, I know I am teaching tai chi when the person in the wheelchair that I thought was oblivious to the class shares later that it was the first time in years that they remember breathing. Or as a frail senior stumbles away in their walker saying they feel more alive, stable and relaxed. I know I am teaching tai chi when the breath and relaxation of the form drops the armor of the teenager so she is free to cry over the death of her mother.

After all, what really is tai chi but a dance to connect with ourselves, with others and the world?

Thank you, Sensei, for trusting in me and allowing me the opportunity to teach. Thank you for all the lessons learned along the way. A special thank you for being such a great improvisational tai chi master. Thank you for never putting tai chi in a box and wrapping it with a tidy ribbon and a bow. Thank you for your magic of flowing between form and no form while teaching connection, balance and non-attachment with a lightness of being, great humor and loving energy.

Thanks to all my students, young and old, who give me the privilege and the honor of sharing my experience of tai chi with them and who make each class a chance for me to become a better teacher and a better person.