

MY JOURNEY: Shodan Essay

It took me eight years to really learn one of the first moves of tai chi, the integration breath, a simple raising and lowering of the hands. Eighteen years later I am testing for my black belt in tai chi. As a wise Sensei says...“Fast is slow, slow is fast”.

I was footloose and free, having cashed in my life to travel solo til my money or my urge to explore disappeared. The details are unimportant but, in short, after a long time overseas I was forced to return to the U.S. due to a serious disorder of my immune system. Aware of the healing benefits of tai chi, I asked my doctor if he'd recommend it to aid in my recovery. He assured me my body wasn't strong enough, but that there was a move that would be gentle and adaptable to sitting, standing, or lying in bed. He showed me the integration breath-- a slow raising and lowering of my arms. He told me to do that movement a few minutes each day, increasing the duration as I became stronger.

And so I did. Sometimes sitting in a chair when I felt too weak. Sometimes standing for only a minute or two. Gradually without becoming dizzy and losing my breath. Then without my arms getting tired. Finally without becoming wobbly, without aching joints. Little by little, with no big fanfare or fireworks, that simple movement became my teacher, my healer and my yardstick to health. It didn't ask a lot of me, but gave me so much if I only just returned to it each day.

The integration breath was really my first teacher of tai chi. Over many years, it taught me to calm my mind, concentrating on what I could do, instead of what I couldn't. It taught me to relax my body so the healing energy could move through me. It taught me patience, to quit worrying about “getting there” (healthy), but to embrace the only thing I really have-- this moment in time. It taught me to trust in my body's ability to heal itself. It taught me to connect with my breath and revealed the secret of effortless power--moving with, not against, the rhythm of life and it's unending energy. It taught me how to take care of myself so I could then be healthy enough to give to others. And the integration breath showed me the power of “opposites”. Being sick taught me how to be well. Being weak taught me how to be strong. Being contracted and shut down taught me how to stay open.

Years later I stepped on the mat for my first tai chi class at Aikido Ai. As Sensei led us in the integration breath, I realized I had been doing tai chi all along. I have now learned countless forms, but each morning I still return to the integration breath. Tai chi is no longer about how many forms I know, how fast I learn them, or how perfect they are executed. Instead it has become about what holds the form together. Just as my life isn't about how much I do, but with how much integrity, compassion, generosity and love I do it. Tai chi, to me, is simply about a sincere spirit that is willing to try, try again. It is about finding my center in all ways. It is about keeping balance in my life. It is about staying rooted when the going gets tough and connected with the bigger picture even when doubts arise. It is about giving and receiving. Tai chi is about being right here, right now, in this sacred moment. And, perhaps most importantly, it is about deeply communicating and connecting with everything and everyone with a sense of harmony and compassion.

Invariably people ask me “Why do you do tai chi?” This used to be an easier question to answer. And it is a fair question to even ask myself each morning as I breathe into the form. Perhaps the real reason I do tai chi is that the question, “Why do I do this?”, rarely crosses my mind. I'm not even sure I do it anymore. It does me. It has become a part of who I am. Every time I take a conscious breath, be in the moment, or move with an open spirit aligned with the energy of the universe, I am doing tai chi.

The black belt exam isn't about thinking I belong in the company of the very advanced black belts in our dojo. It is truly about feeling like a shodan -- a beginner. It is the feeling that 18 years after taking my first integration breath, I can truly begin to learn. In Zen, Sensei talks about Big Love being about going beyond our own needs, beyond our own attachments. As a student and as Soto Deshi at Aikido Ai, I have a big love for the community of people that make up our dojo, for Sensei and for the beautiful art of tai chi. Giving and receiving, like much else in life, are one big circle. My training at Aikido Ai is the gift that never stops giving as long as I just show up. Thank you, Sensei.

What else can I say? Only right here, right now. The only words that come to mind are those of my first siempi, whose generosity of time and spirit not only taught me the beginning forms, but showed me the true spirit of tai chi.... “I try best.” Thank you, Miss Nina. One more very important thing. Tai chi is tremendous fun.