

## TAI CHI AS A JOURNEY: THE DISCIPLINE OF DAILY PRACTICE

Don't waste time calculating your chances of success or failure. Just fix your aim and begin. (Guan Yin Tzu)

Those that follow the Tao don't seek to arrive anywhere, so their journey is never over. (Lao Tzu)

Have you ever vowed one day to rise earlier and practice longer, only to wake up the next morning a person of a different mind?

When I first began my daily practice of Tai Chi, I awakened each morning with a merry-go-round of excuses parading through my mind. "It's too early. It's too cold. I need more sleep. Missing one day won't matter. I practiced a long time yesterday. I have class tonight. I've got to get to the studio and work." The passing of four years time, lots of laughter at myself, and an abiding sense of discipline later, and all these thoughts still come to visit! But now they are only clouds passing through the sky of my mind. The discipline of daily practice has become a way of moving through my life. Not thinking - just doing, just embracing, just living.

Every day I awaken to the simple beauty of the form. Each morning I connect with the harmony of its spirit, the fluidity of its movements, the depth of its tradition, the art of its postures, the simplicity of its movements and the slowness of its pace. The result is a deepening sense of integrity, inner strength and calm. There is something very soothing about the first breaths of each awakening day being inhaled and exhaled into the eight treasures and the Tai Chi form.

Daily practice is about commitment and dedication. It is about making time despite the voices in my head. It is about allowing the practice to lead me gently to a closer union with my own true spirit and beyond to the bigger picture. In daily practice, little by little, I take Tai Chi into my life. Each day I let myself step into the unknown, until more and more I am able to rest on any edge with a sense of solid ground and a deepening sense of trust, calm and openness.

Attending class has come for me, only a small part of Tai Chi. To just show up for an hour and expect movement towards clarity and ease was not realistic. I found that the heart of Tai Chi is about going home and deepening whatever I have learned on the mat. Classes teach me the movements, but daily practice slowly reveals their essence to me. Discipline is the day to day just doing it, and then, at any moment, realizing just how far I've come without thinking about it. From morning to morning there can be huge changes, or they can be so subtle that they only shine in the tiny nuances of the form or the hidden crevasses of my life.

To be motivated to awaken in the dark to enter the embrace of the Tai Chi form, it is important for me to approach my practice with laughter, curiosity and a sense of adventure. Like my time on the mat, daily practice can be fun. It is a chance for exploration - to take home what I have learned and play with it like a ball of clay, shaping it, and beginning to make it mine. If I don't remember a move quite right, I just go back to class to observe and chisel out the finer details. Each time I experience a move, whether on the mat or at home, I have absorbed more of its shape and substance. Each time I practice the form it more and more becomes both my teacher and my friend.

Daily practice has taught me that Tai Chi is not about how fast I learn the form, how many moves I pick up during a class, or how quickly I progress to the next sash. Instead, the beauty of Tai Chi is that fast and slow do not exist. What is time anyway but a social agreement between people? We really have only this moment. The beauty of Tai Chi is that there is no finish line. Tai Chi is a journey without end. Like the yin-yang circle, like life itself, it is never-ending, always changing, and I am continually learning. Tai Chi has now become a series of small steps, taken one at a time, each as important as the next and the last.

And so I begin each morning with an integration breath, my hands gently raising up and slowly floating down. And each morning, in that beginning, simple movement, I am reminded to enjoy the journey, to wherever I am, to take everything one breath, one move at a time, and to practice, practice, practice.

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