

DEEPER INTO TAI CHI: TRAINING ON THE EDGE

As beginners starting to learn Tai Chi, we all feel like toddlers discovering how to walk again. We stumble, fall, and lean upon other students for support and guidance. Each moment we are on the edge as we begin to re-connect mind/body and breath/spirit, letting go of our self-critical thoughts and surrendering to the moment. We feel awkward, embarrassed and frustrated - all the wonderful ingredients that make up growth and change.

But as we train longer, often the edge of the cliff turns into a comfortable plateau. We begin to get complacent doing the form and we mindlessly go through the moves. Instead of going deeper, our training glides along the surface, safe and predictable. To walk on the edge of our training, we need to move out of our comfortable box and step once again into the unfamiliar, the unknown. Tai Chi is an art and, like all arts, it will take us as deep as we are willing to go. But what is it that keeps us stuck? What keeps us from going deeper?

If we are honest with ourselves, often we don't go deeper in our training because of our own fears. To walk the edge, as both beginning and advanced students, means to let go of fear - the fear of not knowing, the fear of not being in control, the fear of looking stupid, the fear of intimacy, and the fear of the unfamiliar. While traveling in foreign countries, inevitably I would meet people who opted to stay in the comfort and safety of their hotel rather than venture out into the newness of their surroundings. They never allowed themselves to become acquainted with the unfamiliar and so to challenge their sense of themselves in the world. How many times on the mat and in our lives have we let fear be the wall instead of our great teacher?? Yet moving through our fears is where we stretch our limitations and grow and deepen. Anything of worth in life requires effort, risk and sacrifice - and a moving through fear and doubt.

Going deeper into our training also means facing the fear of who we really are beneath the layers of contractions and armor that gradually get peeled off as we learn to relax and let go. Tai Chi asks us to soften, to become vulnerable and sensitive, and to feel more deeply. It beckons us to stay out of denial and not become hardened and stagnant. But to do this means to open to both the pain and pleasure in our lives. There is risk in opening and safety and comfort in staying contracted. But what about the risk of staying closed off from life? The decision to learn Tai Chi was undoubtedly made in an opening. Questions and doubt only arise when fear closes the door. Tai Chi asks us to open, time and time again. It trains us to let go, to lose the attachment to who we think we are and to connect with the mystery and magic of the moment. The deeper we are able to train, the more we discover that the slowness, softness and flexibility that Tai Chi nurtures creates deeper awareness, courage and strength.

Sometimes it is our own laziness that keeps us from going deeper. To train on the edge means to engage the form with our entire mind, body and spirit. How easy it is to become complacent and just go through the moves. But if we lose the vibrancy and the immediacy of the present moment we will miss the true meaning of Tai Chi. The Tai Chi form is not fixed, but is alive and ever-changing. It is our teacher showing us where we are with each new breath.

Another block to training on the edge is our attachment to our own expectations. Expectations, on the mat as in life, are a wall to our growth. If we can allow learning to unfold without a concern for where it is going our Tai Chi will deepen. It is very easy to get attached to our own pace while doing the form and also while moving in the outside world. How often when on the mat are we internally complaining that someone is moving too quickly or too slowly? How often in life does the car, the salesperson, and the line at the supermarket move at a rhythm we don't like. Yet Tai Chi teaches that it is US that needs to blend, take a shorter or longer step, and adapt to the pace around us. Clinging to how we would like things to be is not good Tai Chi. To go deeper into our training is to become part of the flow rather than the resistance, on the mat and in our lives.

For me, training on the edge means to take personal risks on the mat. It is positioning myself on a corner where I must lead with what I know and reveal what I don't. It is volunteering when asked or being willing to try a new technique. Deeper training comes when I embrace a new move without attachment to getting it right and an old move without attachment to thinking I have mastered it. Training on the edge means to go home and struggle with what I have learned on the mat. It is weaving practice into the tapestry of my life as daily discipline, not just as part of a group class. It means to breathe with the form, to keep my mind empty, and to be in the moment. It means to remember that Tai Chi is not about how many moves I know, but how I hold my spirit in the dojo and in the world.

For me, going deeper into my Tai Chi is to allow myself to feel the emotions that come up while on the mat and in my life. It is in being willing to put myself on the line where my vulnerability (but also my sincerity) is clear. Training on the edge is to look for ways to assist and deepen the life of our dojo. It is in the reaching out to new students with enthusiasm and guidance and the long time students with respect, friendship and support. It is to appreciate that assisting a beginning student is as much training as working on my latest form. It is in extending my arms and heart out wide enough to embrace the entire Aikido-ai family. Training on the edge is to also deepen my gratitude for this amazing art that has been passed down from master to student for countless generations. And it is in not taking for granted the gifts of Sensei's teachings and the dojo where I have the opportunity to train.

Tai Chi is a place to open and feel more energetic, more alive, and more loving. It should be fun, passionate, and challenging. Ultimately going deeper into our training is to go deeper into ourselves, then outward to connect with everyone and everything, with no separation between the dojo and our lives.