

Five principles of good Tai Chi Ch'uan skills

An interview with Mr. Benjamin Lo of San Francisco.

Five basic principles for the development of good Tai Chi Ch'uan skills, emphasized by Mr. Benjamin Lo, are: 1) Relaxation. 2) Separating Ying from Yang. 3) Turning the waist. 4) Keeping the body upright. And 5) Maintaining the hand like a beautiful lady's hand.

Lo, who teaches in the San Francisco area, puts first the most difficult of the principles: relaxation.

"People always say to me, 'You always emphasize relaxation. But how do I do it?' I say, 'Do the form.' That's the only way. A lot of people ask me: 'Do you have any special posture that can help me relax?' I say yes. They ask, 'What?' I say: 'Do the form.'"

"If we had some other kind of posture or form that will help your body relax, we wouldn't be teaching you Tai Chi Ch'uan. We would be teaching you that. But so far, we haven't found those kinds of things."

Lo said relaxation involves the entire body at the same time, "not just one wrist, one palm, one leg, etc." "We want your whole body relaxed at the same time. So far as I know, Tai Chi Ch'uan does this. Of course, other kinds of martial arts maybe have this, too. But I don't know."

Lo's second important principle is separating Yin from Yang.

"Yin and Yang are Chinese words and have the meaning insubstantial and substantial. Sometimes in ordinary talk about Tai Chi Ch'uan we discuss separating the weight. But that is not exactly right." "I can put my weight on one leg and the other leg has no weight. But in the meantime, the other leg can be stiff, too. The Yin has to be soft and have no weight. Soft and relaxed. But at the same time mixed together. Even the Yang leg has to be relaxed."

"Even if you don't use force, your arm can be tense. That's because we are human beings. We have our limitation. But we try to use less muscle than we usually do." "Most people use 10% of their muscles, but maybe we use five or four or three percent at the senior level. You can't say completely don't use muscles. When you need it, you use it. When you don't need it, relax."

During push hands, Lo, who has practiced over 40 years, said the goal is to use internal strength and to avoid the use of force. "Usually, I tell my students don't use force. Instead, use sung. How do you translate sung? Relaxation is not an exact translation. Relaxation can just be collapse but that is not the meaning of sung."

Lo said there are different degrees of relaxation and that in push hands this often becomes apparent. "If you meet someone who is better at push hands, then you become hard. When they meet someone who is better than them, they become hard. That's the reason we have to practice and practice. It is a lifetime challenge. There is no end."

He also said that softness can be like water, which can become very strong, or wind, which is soft, but can have the power of a tornado and destroy a city.



As to how a student can combine and separate softness and strength, he said: "The student has to slowly practice. practice. And practice."

"I always tell the student, 'If I tell you and you can get it right away, that's learning. But if I tell you and you can't get it right away, then you have to slowly practice until you get it. gradual practice over a period of time. Without practice you can't get it. If after people have told you and you can't get it then it's because you haven't practiced."

Practice, Lo said, involves patience and perseverance. "Students want to find the good teacher. Why? Because he can show them the right direction. If you have the right teacher, a good teacher, it is still not a guarantee that you will be good. You have to practice. Sometimes both teacher and student have the frustration. But you have to be patient and keep practicing."

"I tell people when they learn Tai Chi Ch'uan that patience is not enough because people always lose patience. So I tell people you have to have perseverance. We have never heard of people losing perseverance."

"Patience is good but it is not enough. After five years you can quit. I have seen people practice 20 years and quit. If you have 20 years patience, it is pretty good, but if you have it a lifetime, then we call it perseverance."

"Of course, a lot of people quit. Of course, teachers feel frustrated, too. Sometimes they feel, 'I put a lot of time and energy in and these people cannot learn.' So the teacher needs a lot of patience and perseverance too."

The inner struggle that goes on during the study and practice of Tai Chi Ch'uan is also important, Lo said. And this involves the student's having to fight with himself first.

"When you practice Tai Chu Ch'uan, it is not just physical. You try to make your willpower stronger, too. When your willpower is stronger, you won't easily quit. Everybody feels frustration, including myself. But you have to overcome it. Otherwise, nobody can help you."

"This part is pretty difficult. That's why we have to struggle inside. Some people can take a lot of pressure. Some people collapse easy. Everybody has a different capacity."

Push hands, he said, requires the same emphasis on the five principles as the form and it has the added value of enabling students to check on their own development, whether it be relaxation or form.

"I always tell my students, 'Your partner is your teacher when you practice push hands.'" "Usually, people get better," Lo said. But he said he tells students not to expect straight or steady improvement, rather in a curve that can go up and down.

"You have to keep practicing. When you breakthrough, then you jump up. But sometimes you can stay in one place and can't break through. When we reach a certain level, we think that's our limit. But nobody knows our potential. I think the student should always be better than the teacher."

But he said that students should not compare their progress with other people. "Compare with

yourself. For instance, before you practiced Tai Chi Ch'uan every year you caught colds often and got sick often. After practice, you get sick less."

"Or, after you practice many years, it never happens. That's great. That means to compare with yourself. If you compare yourself with other people then you make trouble for yourself." However, he added, that sometimes it is good to compare oneself with others because other people can be a source of stimulation for practice.

"Sometimes people ask me if U.S. students can do good Tai Chi Ch'uan. And I always answer, 'Why not?' Chinese and American students are no different. The main thing, somehow, is that American students need more discipline. All the teachers have the same feeling like that. Without discipline, you can't stay long. Otherwise, within a few years you quit.

"I think it is based on cultural background. Chinese say, 'Okay, I practice Tai Chi Ch'uan and if it takes 10 years, then okay.' But here, in 10 months they must have some result."

Regarding goals in practice, Lo said: "When I started Tai Chi Ch'uan, I was very ill. I was sick very bad. I could walk maybe 15 yards. Do you think I had a goal? Sure, I wanted to recover my health. Then I practiced and got healthy and then I wanted to keep this way."

"Later, when I began teaching, I wanted to be healthy and keep on with my research and study. Of course, everybody has limitations, including myself. But I just do my best. That's what I tell my students. If you feel you are doing your best, then that's okay."

Lo's five major points also include turning the waist, keeping the body upright and maintaining the hand like a beautiful lady's hand.

You have to follow the five, he said. "If you can't follow the five, then follow four. Of course, it is better to follow four than to follow three. But it's still not good. It is better to follow all five."

Of the five principles, the first one, relaxation, is the most difficult, he said. The other four, he said, everyone can do. "You don't even have to know Tai Chi Ch'uan to do them perfectly. The problem is that when you put them together, you can't do it, especially when your legs start burning, aching, shaking and you forget about all the principles. A lot of people are like this."

"It is all very, very simple but it is hard to do it. Talk is easy. One minute you can know the five principles, but maybe in 50 years you won't get it, especially relaxation."

"Everybody thinks that they are relaxed, but when you meet somebody better than you, you become hard. So we can't be perfect. It is a lifetime challenge. We just keep doing and doing. Just the basic things."

----Retyped by David Chen, 2001.