

Keep Practicing

The South Puget Sound Tai Chi Newsletter

Empty Step Tai Chi Association

Vol. 1 No. 1

<http://www.emptysteptaichi.com>

Welcome to Empty Step!

The Empty Step Tai Chi Association came into being to promote Tai Chi, Chi Kung and related practices throughout the South Puget Sound region.

It has hosted, with its partner organizations (the YMCA and Metro Parks) over five World Tai Chi Day celebrations, and several Tai Chi Picnics. In addition, it has provided numerous demonstrations and sample classes to various groups and organizations around our area.

We are pleased to present our first 'Keep Practicing' newsletter, intended to inform and entertain, as well as present news and information to support your Tai Chi practice.

In this issue you will find an article by our founder, Gary Wessels, entitled "On Practice" which discusses the benefits and goals of our Tai Chi, and things we can do to support and motivate ourselves.

There is also an article entitled "Relax!" which examines the first of our Five Basic Principles of Tai Chi.

In future issues we will be covering many different topics of interest to the inquiring student. Such as: The Five Basic Principles; Rooting; Chi Kung and Chi Flow; The benefits of Push Hands Practice; Balance; and The Empty Step.

I hope this newsletter will help motivate, inform and entertain you and move you along the path to greater self-mastery and awareness. Please feel free give us your feedback for this newsletter. We want to make certain that we are providing the best possible information, resources and events for all of our players.



A beautiful World Tai Chi Day at the Pagoda in Point Defiance in 2008.

On Practice

By Gary Wessels

Awhile back a couple of my students were talking to me about practice and one made the comment that they didn't practice more because they were too busy with other important things. These included the many things that tend to fill our lives: work, going to the store, cooking for their family, bringing family members to their lessons/meetings, exercising, going to church, etc. After doing all these essential chores there just wasn't time for one more chore: practicing tai chi.

I didn't have an immediate response because all of these chores are important. We have to work. We have to eat. We need to bring our kids to their various activities. It took me awhile to realize why something about that conversation just didn't sit well with me. Then it hit. Tai chi practice isn't a chore. It isn't just one more thing we should do. If it's part of a list, practice is a reward for doing those chores, not one of those chores we should make time for. Instead of "do I have time for one more chore", it's really "wow, I've finished my chores and now I can practice".

But really, tai chi practice can be and really is much more than this. Forget the list. Forget the "should do's". What then is tai chi practice?

I think that tai chi practice is a way, a path, for personal development. This includes physical, mental and spiritual development.

On the physical level we know it helps develop basic physical strength, flexibility and balance. Internally it balances our internal systems and promotes overall health. Mentally it helps develop and maintain mental acuity, it promotes a calm emotional demeanor, and it helps develop a deeper awareness of our surroundings.

If that were all that tai chi did and was capable of doing, this would be more than enough reason to spend some serious time practicing. Who doesn't want to be able to access this laundry list of healthy attributes?

But tai chi is much more. This ties into what is generally referred to as spiritual

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Relax!

"More practice. More relax. No one can help you," said Benjamin Lo, Yang style Master and senior student to Grand Master Cheng Man-Ching of our lineage.

The first, most important and perhaps hardest principle of the Five Basic Principles to follow is to relax.

The opposite of relaxation is tension. Tension causes stress. Tension impedes or misdirects Chi flow. Tension uses energy to no useful purpose. When we relax, we release stress, we improve the ease and flow of Chi and conserve our energy.

The Chinese character used when referring to this relaxation is *sung*. *Sung* connotes physical relaxation, but also mental alertness. The desired relaxation is not a 'sitting-on-the-Barca-lounger-with-your-feet-up' kind of relaxation, but more a conscious use of the least amount of energy or effort while maintaining or holding the desired postures or positions. And though we are physically relaxed, our attention is completely present and wide open on each moment, and each movement as we practice.

Over time, as we practice relaxing during the Form or our exercises, and as we gain more awareness and understanding of how we individually hold tension in our bodies, we can slowly develop a 'Relaxation response.' A habit, if you will, of relaxing into our movements and postures rather than tightening up as we move.

This relaxation is key to achieving better balance, rooting, and smoothness as we do Tai Chi, and is a key component in neutralizing an

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Relax!

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opponent's advances in Two-person Push Hands practice.

When we are relaxed, our Chi can flow more freely, we have greater stamina, and we are able to feel or sense an opponent's energy or movements more clearly.

How do we achieve this 'relaxation response,' this greater openness and centeredness? The same way you get to Carnegie Hall, . . . practice, practice, practice. As we practice, over time, we develop an awareness of where we are holding tension in the body as we move. The best type of practice for this is holding postures (holding a single posture and being attentive to what part of the body first shows signs of the pain, soreness or over-exertion that tension creates in the muscles and tendons).

As our awareness expands, our ability to notice, and release tension as it appears, increases. As we notice tension in our shoulders say, we can focus on that area, breathe, and make a conscious effort to relax. The more we do this, the better we get.

Tension can also result from incorrect alignment or posture. Again, ongoing practice will allow us to self-determine the source of the issue that is causing the tension (whether muscular or alignment), and help us to release and resolve that tension.

In conclusion, if we continue to practice, our attention and awareness of our body and any associated tension we might have and we move, will become apparent to us. When we place our attention on that area (know as tension attention, . . . not really, . . . sorry about that), we can begin to naturally release the tightness and stress, developing our relaxation response.

I leave you with Benjamin Lo's admonition, "More practice. More relax. No one can help you."



The Push Posture is one of the six fundamental postures that make up Grasp the Sparrow's Tail.

On Practice

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development. This has nothing to do with one's religion, beliefs in god or an afterlife. It has everything to do with how we relate to the entire universe as it presents itself to us on a moment by moment basis. This is really big stuff! But this simple practice, done on a regular basis, is very powerful. How does that work?

When we practice tai chi we have to be present. This is obvious, but also really important. When we're, say, going through the form, we need to have our mind only on the form. And only on the specific movement we're doing right then. Not what we just did, not what we're going to be doing next, but only and wholly on what we are doing at that moment. By letting our awareness not be distracted by

our future plans, we can let our present awareness flow through our entire bodies.

This is an interesting process. The more we can allow our present awareness to be receptive, the more input we become aware of and the more we can process. We find that there is a wealth of sensory input that we typically aren't aware of. This is almost the opposite of going to a night club or rock show where the visual and auditory stimulus is so great that we have to consciously block out as much as we can. During practice, when we can open our awareness we can find levels of input that we just didn't know were out there. This is not the same as imagining things. Imagining or making up things just gets in the way and slows down the process. This process is analogous on a mundane level to differences in the sensory world we as

humans typically live in and the sensory world that dogs typically live in. Dogs typically experience a sensory world, especially the senses of smell, hearing and taste, which is much greater than what we typically experience. Just because we don't smell something or hear something, doesn't mean that the sensory input isn't out there.

Now with tai chi we aren't generally interested in smelling more things like dogs. That is not the point. (At least for me.) But there is much more sensory input that we can potentially become aware of. I would describe this input more in terms of energetic input. This can take the form of the awareness of specific energy forces and fields. My intent in this letter is not to expound specifically on energetics, but on what tai chi practice is and does. This open awareness is a direct effect of continuing practice. This is really just a deepening awareness of the world in which we live. There's not a right or a wrong here. By regular continuing practice we can open more deeply to the richness of each present moment. Tai chi practice in this context isn't something separate from our lives. It definitely is not just another chore to be checked off our "to do" list. It is, however, a direct expression of, and connection with, the richness inherent in our lives. Why wouldn't we practice more?

Gary

Empty Step Tai Chi
Association

Upcoming Events

- Feb. 9 – Advanced Class
- Mar. 9 – Open Workshop
- Apr. 13 – Advanced Class
- Apr. 27 – World Tai Chi Day
- May 11 – Advanced Class

For more information, find our website online at www.emptysteptaichi.com or call us at 253-973-7887.

Practice Tip of the Day

“Walk like a cat.”

– Tai Chi Classics