

Bonsai Tai Chi

The Blog



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Tai chi Mistakes

Before I discovered tai chi I used to run. I ran about five miles every morning, more at weekends. If I had to go out on business I would get up at 5am to go running first. Weather never stopped me. I ran in rain, I ran in below freezing temperatures. You could say I was obsessed.

That obsession switched to tai chi. It came as no hardship for me to practise that every day instead of running. Discussing this with fellow students I was often met with the objection: "But what if you make mistakes?" One instructor even suggested it was not a good idea for that very reason. (Just for the record I had to stop running because I damaged a knee.)

My feeling has always been that it is better to practise than not to practise. I always said to my training partners: "You have to practise your mistakes every day." Nowadays I give my students the same advice. As important as it is to get the form right it has always seemed to me better to be doing something than nothing. Mistakes can be corrected, that is why we go to classes. You have to take ownership of your tai chi and make it yours, practising regardless of mistakes is the way you do this.

I did sometimes wonder if I was right but recently I came across a passage in a book written by another tai chi instructor. "Perfectionists," he said, "make poor tai chi students." His point, which I now realise is what I have been trying to articulate for the past eight years, is that if you become obsessed with the form you are in grave danger of missing the point. Of not discovering what tai chi is really about.

It also made sense of something a senior student once said to me: "At some point," he told me, "you will have to stand back from tai chi." He didn't elaborate and I didn't understand what he meant. But if you substitute 'the form' for 'tai chi' then I think he was probably making the same point.

We all know that the detail of the form is important: a tiny bit out when you test a posture and it will not work. The form gives you structure and posture. It teaches you balance and the correct way to move. Get it right and it can give you effortless power which can benefit your other activities. But in the end it is the control of your energy and the ability to use it to power your movements that makes tai chi different from everything else we do. ☯

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