

Sunday, October 26, 2008

### **Learning one cookie at a time.**

Some people reach ecstasy by seeing their favorite band live, as have I, when experiencing such superhumans as Return to Forever, Dizzy Gillespie, and Cat Anderson. Yesterday, I reached ecstasy by interacting more directly than ever with t'ai chi Master Ben Lo. Frequent readers of this blog know that I believe strongly in applying the principles of t'ai chi to the practice of law and to the rest of my life, and that two lawyers inspired me most to practice t'ai chi. Curiously, Master Lo -- who focuses his students on the power of being mindfully relaxed and soft -- playfully tells me that lawyers and salespeople tend to be stiff. Maybe he thinks their minds are subject to too much intellectual clutter. Wishing to hear this megamaster rather than debating him, I did not bother suggesting that such stereotypes do not work, in part considering that all lawyers were non-lawyers at some point in their lives. Yesterday was my fourth class with Master Lo since 1995. Master Lo visits the District of Columbia area from his California home around once or more annually. He started off the weekend session by asking why people came to the class. One attendee said she was there to learn t'ai chi from him. His ultimate response as we proceeded was that it is easy to learn about t'ai chi, but much more difficult to apply it. He then proceeded to emphasize the importance of learning t'ai chi at one's own pace, while he pushes students into his teaching realm of "no burn, no earn/no pain, no gain," or, as his teacher Cheng Man Ch'ing once pointed out to his students while on a walk that they have plenty of time in the future to rest (gesturing towards a cemetery) but that much is left to be done while on this Earth. Master Lo emphasizes that a student is best to proceed to the next level when s/he is ready for it. He analogizes it to distributing cookies to a hungry person. The hungry person gets more out of the cookie by being given one at first before moving onto the next one; giving the person the whole bag of cookies will just oversaturate the situation. Similarly, Master Lo asks whether one learns best by learning one new language, or by dabbling in several without going into full depth. In this spirit of going one cookie at a time, Master Lo first had the fifty attendees -- all required to have completed the t'ai chi form study -- proceed through the full thirty-seven-posture t'ai chi form, and then proceeded the rest of the morning to focus on t'ai chi's five principles: relax and sink the body and mind, keep the body upright (and do not arch the back), turn from the waist, separate the weight as in yin and yang, and keep the wrists and fingers softly unbent. Master Lo next focused on the first third of the t'ai chi form. First, he had us stand at the beginning position, with our feet parallel to each other. He gave correction pointers to everyone, which took several minutes as everyone remained in that posture; he advised me to bend my arms slightly more. Each time all one's weight was supposed to be on the practitioner's bent leg, he told everyone to check to assure that the empty leg was indeed empty by lifting it one centimeter without leaning the body; that is easier said than done. Standing for a long time in the beginning posture is not too hard. However, Master Lo then had all of us hold the first push hands posture, and did not get to me until a few minutes into it. He advised me to sink my waist further towards the ground, which would not have been as uncomfortable when we started holding the posture a few minutes before. As Master Lo says: "No burn, no earn. No pain, no gain" and "My name is Ben Lo, as in bend low." Master Lo included a focus on the Lifting Hands movement, which can be performed in the smallest of spaces, whether standing or sitting, and even with one hand as the other holds a telephone; and which is very beneficial for those whose knees prevent them from performing the demanding knee-bending of t'ai chi that might look easy but, when performed properly, requires keeping the remaining leg completely empty. The t'ai chi chuan Yang style short form might have thirty-seven designated postures (which are actually guideposts to fluid movements that my teacher Len Kennedy described as holding a silk thread that will break if one moves too slowly or too quickly), but it has many more movements than that. For instance, as Master Lo demonstrated, in Lifting Hands alone, the hands go through five movements from beginning to end. Why did Master Lo decide to study t'ai chi? Decades ago, he was very sick, and visited a traditional Chinese medicine doctor in his native Taiwan when other form(s) of medicine failed. The Chinese medicine doctor gave him a prescription that did not work, and the doctor responded that Master Lo must be in particularly poor health, because this particular prescription ordinarily was very effective. The doctor advised Master Lo to exercise at a time when he had difficulty even walking across a room. The doctor recommended t'ai chi, and offered to teach him. The doctor was a demanding t'ai chi teacher, and within a few months, Master Lo's health had improved to the point that he no longer needed medicine. The doctor had come to Taiwan around 1949 from the mainland due to the Communist takeover there. People would come far and wide to study t'ai chi with this doctor. Master Lo had not originally known the doctor's fame as a t'ai chi teacher, who was none other than megamaster Professor Cheng Man Ch'ing, who taught the teacher of my two main t'ai chi teachers. I asked Master Lo whether I will face any obstacles to achieving in t'ai chi if I do not yet believe in the presence of chi or the tan tien, which purportedly holds the chi in the abdominal area. He responded with a demonstration, telling me to face him with my feet parallel; he repeated that they still were not parallel and to line them up with the gym's wooden boards. He told me to place my palm in the area near his navel (which is near the tan tien's purported location) and to push him. The first time, he made his body limp, and I pushed him easily. He next made his body stiff; having done very little push hands practice (instead doing daily t'ai chi form practice, when not falling behind), and standing face-to-face with a man I look up to as if he

were atop Mount Everest, at first I did not push too hard, so he told me to push harder, and he was easily pushed. Finally, he made his body actively relaxed, putting his mind into his tan tien; not only could I not push him, but one thousand heavyweights combined probably could not have. Next, he easily pushed me; I have a long way to go. Master Lo later proceeded a similar pushing exercise with his extended arm with two other attendees. They easily pushed his arm when it was limp and when it was stiff. However, when he actively relaxed his arm and put his mind into his arm, no amount of force could move it. Master Lo told of one of his students who arranged for him to teach the student's students one day, and asked if Master Lo might be able to discuss anything new, rather than repeating what he always would repeat before, which probably included to relax and to practice. He replied that this will be easy to do once the students are able to apply what he had previously taught them. The end of the morning session arrived, and I had already taken up half of my family day, which is every Saturday, so, sadly, I had to leave. Before departing, I told Master Lo how much he had helped me over the years, as he has done for countless thousands of others directly or through their teachers who have studied with him. This was the point when he talked about lawyers and stiffness. I gave him my law firm's pen, which contains the t'ai chi symbol enveloping the scales of justice, and told him how I try applying t'ai chi to my practice of law. When I told Master Lo that, time permitting in the morning, I sometimes circle the courthouse where I am scheduled and conclude with t'ai chi, he asked if some people think I am crazy I told him of my temporary police detention last June, when I was a suspected t'ai chi terrorist. He suggested that I not practice t'ai chi in airports. In any event, the late David Chen -- who established his own local t'ai chi school after studying with Master Lo's local student Arnold Lee -- has a photo on his own website also practicing airport t'ai chi. How else to kill time dealing with airplane delays? Master Lo then left me with advice that I do not recall hearing before from anyone: Practice t'ai chi in the morning and in the evening. Before, I thought that once a day was the bare necessary minimum. This morning, I went to the deck in the back of our home, and practiced t'ai chi before starting my day. I felt the results of the muscular burn from holding postures the morning before, and simultaneously felt more physical power from practicing t'ai chi than ever before. Master Lo looks, talks, and acts much more youthful and healthful than his eighty-one years. Although this cell camera picture is overexposed, it gives some visual essence of the man. Thank you, Ben Lo, for you. Jon Katz. ADDENDUM: The weekend Ben Lo event was organized in large or full part by Joanne Chang, who is David Chen's widow. With proceeds going to construction of the David Chen Memorial Tai Chi Court in Maryland's Cabin John Regional Park, Joanne is selling David's posthumously-published *When Yin Meets Yang*. I very much recommend this bilingual English-Chinese book that communicates the essence of t'ai chi both in words and in David's accomplished art. The prefaces by Joanne and Master Lo, alone, are very inspirational. Joanne talks of David's t'ai chi progression to the point that he would enjoy t'ai chi harmony even when doing housework, and getting to the point where he could open heavy commercial building doors without using force from his arms. When he passed, David -- here is a tribute page to him -- had been practicing t'ai chi for only one more year than my current fourteen years, but had already reached quantum levels of achievement. As Master Lo writes in his preface: "David's tireless hours of practice, his instinctive comprehension and his abilities naturally led to him to acquire his Taijiquan skills at an accelerated pace. . . I believed that David would be a key member for developing the Taiji community for future generations." Finally, for t'ai chi practitioners, here are Wolfe Lowenthal's t'ai chi reading list, his partial list of t'ai chi teachers from the Cheng Man Ch'ing lineage, and my t'ai chi links.

Posted by Jon Katz in Persuasion at 00:00