

Tuesday, May 5, 2009

## Are you relaxed? Are you open?

Â A few months ago, a t'ai chi teacher asked if I knew local Judge M\_\_\_\_\_. I did not have much dealings with the judge. The teacher proceeded to tell me that the judge used to practice t'ai chi, but then switched to Aikido, because of the judge's ego, in the teacher's view. Â In my sophomore year of college, I joined the tae kwon do/ Korean karate class, taught on campus and at a nearby studio by Master Lee. I wanted to know how better to defend myself against a physical assault; I was too obsessed with all the real and perceived dangers lurking outside, when later I would end up defending many people in court who allegedly caused assaultive danger. Master Lee loved practicing and teaching tae kwon do. He had an infectious sense of humor. He brought to life the love of practicing tae kwon do, including talking to us of a tae kwon do devotee who would even go outside in the snowy dead of winter, and do tae kwon do punching against a tree. After I got my yellow belt -- apparently, all these belt colors are less common if at all in Korea -- I asked him when I would be taught the next form that typically comes with the yellow belt. He was teaching a one-room schoolhouse of sorts with students of all different belt colors. He told me to practice, and I waited until the next class to learn the next form, and waited. Â Without talking to Master Lee, I eventually stopped going to class. I had concerns about whether all the kicking in the sport was going to exacerbate previous knee problems. However, I did not simply ask him about it; he probably would have had good suggestions to handle my concerns. My ego probably got in the way, too; I had a yellow belt but was still doing white belt forms, so I thought. I made a mistake. Â Eleven years later, I started studying and practicing t'ai chi. I did not feel relaxed and centered enough in my life, and heard that t'ai chi could help. I have stayed with it for over fourteen years. Last October, Master Ben Lo took some time to speak with me during the end-of-morning break on his annual teaching visit to Maryland. He advised me to practice t'ai chi twice daily. Â T'ai chi master Wolfe Lowenthal -- who, like Ben Lo, studied with megamaster Cheng Ch'ing -- recounts in his book *Gateway to the Miraculous: Further Explorations in the Tao of Cheng Man Ch'ing*, that Cheng Man Ch'ing's teacher Yang Cheng Fu advised practicing the t'ai chi form twice in the morning and twice at night, ultimately totalling seven to eight rounds of practice. Cheng Man Ch'ing's first Western student, Bob Smith, told Lowenthal that Yang Cheng Fu was talking of practicing the t'ai chi long form, which takes twenty to thirty minutes to practice, for a minimum of two hours and twenty minutes of practice each day. That is devotion rising to the level of daily practice of professional athletes. Â Practicing t'ai chi sensing hands -- less well described as push hands -- gives the practitioner humility about how far s/he has gotten in t'ai chi, not so much to fight, but to practice being calm and relaxed in the eye of the storm. For the fourth time this year -- deviating from usually spending Saturday mornings with my boy -- I joined with one of the two local weekly t'ai chi push hands groups, where my previous training and practice rarely did push hands. This past Saturday, one of the two people I practice push hands with is the man who introduced me to Zen in the Art of Archery. Several times he pushed me off balance, using no more than four ounces of force against me, which is the t'ai chi way. At one point, he said nobody likes being pushed, and that he did not like being pushed either, in the earlier stages of his practice. I told him I want no mercy. Â This push hands partner reminded me of the importance of applying the t'ai chi principles and elements of the t'ai chi form practice to push hands, including proper stance, rollback, sticking, and not letting the opponent get too close to one's center. The previous week, the leader of the group reminded me of the importance of keeping my body upright and sinking into my press and push. He told me to engage the opponent -- another practitioner talked about the importance of moving along with the opponent, almost to the point of lifting my hands if the opponent does the same, but that was an exaggeration -- and the man who introduced me to Zen in the Art of Archery focused me on relaxing not only to limit the opponent's ability to push me, but also to better sense what is going on with the opponent, and to be better integrated with the energy that surrounds us. Â After nearly two hours of practice, I walked to our cars with the man who introduced me to Zen in the Art of Archery. He reminded me of what Ben Lo constantly repeats: Relax and practice. Relax and practice. This man tries to heed Yang Cheng Fu's advice, by practicing t'ai chi in the morning for ninety minutes, starting at 4:30 a.m., and doing the same in the evening. He said that doing Cheng Man Ch'ing's short form just once in the morning and once at night does little more than getting a warmup, and I previously was not doing much more than that except for Saturday morning practice. Â This practitioner said that, with correct and lengthy practice over time, ultimately one achieves a high enough level in t'ai chi that when asked if one is relaxed and open, the t'ai chi practitioner will answer yes without hesitation. I know I am more relaxed and open today than I was even one year ago, but I have far to go, especially in expanding the time I devote to practicing the t'ai chi form, even though I try applying t'ai chi principles to my life twenty-four hours a day. Â We talked about push hands. I said that I realize I have further to go in setting aside my ego when being pushed in push hands. There is no answer to this but to keep relaxing and practicing. If I respond to a push with hard energy, not only will a skilled t'ai chi practitioner have all the more to push against, but I will have abandoned the lessons of t'ai chi. Â To practice t'ai chi longer each day than I already do, involves a leap of faith that the slow and soft movements of t'ai chi really are highly effective in achieving optimum physical, mental and spiritual health, and that t'ai chi will in fact enable me effectively to self defend against an attacker even wielding a knife (Cheng Man Ch'ing went as far as to say that a skilled internal martial artist

can make a bullet bounce off the body by concentrating on the situation and the shooter effectively enough). It involves my keeping faith in my teachers, and in myself. It involves setting aside and moving beyond my skepticism about there being chi that for males is stored in their semen, and about somewhat familiar talk from traditional Chinese medicine about the relationship of the kidneys, excessive heat, excessive cold, and all other factors in achieving harmonious health. I do know this: A few weeks ago, a prosecutor told me that he was surprised I did not yell at him for asking the judge to postpone my trial just minutes before the trial was about to begin. I replied: "I have continued achieving more t'ai chi calm over the years. I prefer smiling when firing my bullets." He seemed unnerved by this. When people are angry it is easier to find and effectively push their buttons to the pusher's advantage. When the opponent is relaxed and in good spirits, effective button-finding and button-pushing is harder to do. Military parlance is filled with admonitions to "engage the opponent." I have very mixed feelings about the military, and at best feel it is a necessary evil. However, I do feel strongly about the need to engage everyone, whether friend, foe, or in between. T'ai chi helps one do this, by focusing on listening closely and sensitively, quieting one's mind, and being ready to act at a moment's notice when a new danger approaches. Trial battle is indeed war. I have not found anything yet that beats t'ai chi for preparing for and executing such war. Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Persuasion at 00:00