

T'AI CHI, TOOLS, and TIME

By Sifu Paul Abdella

During my time studying T'ai Chi with Master Liang I often heard him make the pronouncement "My art is with the music and the tassel!" to describe what he felt was his unique contribution to the art of T'ai Chi Ch'uan. "I want to make T'ai Chi more scientific and more aesthetic" was a frequently added qualifier to the first statement. His reference to music is of course the introduction of counting, rhythm and the use of music as a backdrop and learning tool for the practice of T'ai Chi forms. In this short article I would like to examine the merits of Master Liang's use of music and other 'tools of time' in the study and practice of the Solo Form. I would also like to share some methods I have used in my practice to go beyond their inherent limitations. The use of the tassel as an aesthetic element in the practice of the sword and broadsword will have to be the topic of another article.

Benefit of the beat

I have found that the use of counting to learn and practice T'ai Chi has four primary benefits. First, as a way to learn the postures of the solo form, the natural rhythms of each movement can easily be counted out making them much easier for a student to learn and assimilate. Occasionally I encounter a student whose particular learning style does not adapt well to counting and requires another approach but for the most part counting is a highly effective tool for learning new movement.

Second, counting helps unify body movements. If a student knows exactly what actions take place on a given count the important concept of moving in a unified and connected way becomes clear and accessible.

Third, moving to a counting rhythm regulates breathing. A frequently asked question by a new student is "What should I be doing with my breathing?" To this question I reply, "Let the body breathe naturally." Moving to the count will provide natural stimulation for rhythmic deep breathing. Fourth and finally, counting provides a natural focus tool that allows the mind to calm and enter a meditative state.



Master Liang's use of music for form practice was a way to integrate these four attributes of rhythm into a seamless enjoyable practice. His concept was to learn the postures to a count, then apply the count and focus the mind to the beat of the music. The calming rhythm and melody of the music would help one relax, and the use of deep rhythmic breathing would help bring one to a meditative or alpha state. It was an innovative strategy that yielded the desired results for someone willing to work through the various stages.

Meditation: Beyond the beat

The use of music was originally intended to be a means to an end, and for Master Liang that end was T'ai Chi as moving meditation--"meditation in action, action in meditation." He often said if you master the form to music then "you will forget the music" and the five attributes of form, perception, consciousness, action and knowledge will become empty. Part of the path to accessing this state of emptiness is to slow down and let the body's own rhythms and those rhythms inherent in the movements naturally emerge. At a certain stage in one's development adhering to the brisk pace and rigid meter of the music may hinder rather than help this process. Other means of practice must then be sought out and employed for progress to continue.

Whether standing, seated, moving or still, all forms of meditation share the common attributes of relaxation, innervation, respiration, concentration, and circulation. To allow the muscles to relax and release excess tension is key to a proper meditation posture. To hold the spine straight in an upright position generates the flow of electricity from the nervous system. Slow deep breathing increases oxygen intake and calms the body/mind. A concentrated attention stimulates brain activity in the frontal cortex where perception is expanded. Circulation is increased from the interaction of all of these areas.

For me personally, the greatest joy and benefit of meditation is the experience of timelessness. Time, the great human invention, has allowed us to control our environment, our productivity, and our selves in order to insure our survival. It has also made us servants of the clock and magnified our sense of separateness from nature and each other.

Even a daily practice of thirty minutes will provide a refreshing reprieve from our notions of time and our

timekeepers, eventually bringing us back to an understanding of the energy nature of all experience.

Our History of Holding

Currently my favorite training routine is a posture holding practice I will describe in detail. First, let me say that holding postures is nothing new to our lineage or our studio. Master Liang advocated holding postures from the form and Ray and I have made frequent use of the metronome as a counting device in our holding practices at the studio. We were also introduced to the sophisticated standing practices of Yi-Ch'uan created by the famed Wang Hsiang-Chai and introduced to our studio by Master Choi. Yi-Ch'uan has added much to our knowledge of how to gain the most from posture holding. It is however, a practice of simplified movement with little footwork that is limited as a direct translation to the solo form. Similarly, holding postures with the metronome allowed us to change the pace of the form but still required an equal cadence during the moving phase of a posture and reduced training options during the holding phase to merely counting the clicks of the metronome.

Tuesdays with Gymboss

Tuesday is Gymboss day in my house. The Gymboss is a small interval timer available online (www.gymboss.com) for about twenty dollars. It's about the size of a wristwatch and clips on to a belt or lapel. It has single or dual interval timers that can be set to a nearly infinite array of timing combinations for up to an hour. I have been using and experimenting with it for several months and it has changed and deepened my form practice significantly.

The practice I do is simple, challenging, and deep. I set the timer to a thirty second repeating interval. Once I press the start button the timer beeps once every thirty seconds until I press the stop button. Simple.

I begin with a simple warm up. I hold ten stances for thirty seconds each. The stances are: Horse, Bow, Taming Tiger, Cross Leg, Cat, Seven Star, Unicorn, Chicken, 60/40, and L-stance. This usually takes about ten minutes and has put my body in many positions that warm the joints, stretch the muscles, and raise my body temperature slightly.

I shake out my limbs and position myself to begin the form.

The Form: Entering Tranquility

At the sound of the beep I begin the first movement of the form at a medium-slow tempo and hold the finished position for the remainder of the thirty-second period. I always move slowly enough to feel connected and harmonious in my movement with a sense of swimming through the air. At the end of the movement I reserve time for holding--at least ten seconds or more, even after the longest postures.

What to do or not do during the holding phase is up to the individual practitioner. In my practice I engage three things. First I adjust the finished position. There are always subtle adjustments to be made that can make the finished posture more aligned with gravity. This can usually be done fairly quickly. Second I bring my attention to my breath. The mind is prone to wander while holding and bringing attention to the breath keeps the mind



centered and the body relaxed and able to transition through any physical discomfort. My intent however, is always to move toward a state of emptiness. If I feel particularly distracted on a given day I will need to stay focused on the two areas just mentioned until my mind quiets down. I usually spend the first section of the form getting to that

place of quiet relaxation. By the end of the section my body is warm, my legs have settled into their stance height, the breath is slow and deep and mental distractions have dissipated. The first taste of emptiness has been served.

“The Chi should be stimulated and the spirit of vitality should be retained internally” is a line from the Classics that generally describes my experience of the second section of the form up to the kicks. A feeling of warm liquid will emerge in the chest, abdomen, palms, and along the spine particularly after repetitive turn and twist postures like Repulse Monkey and Cloud Hands.

As I enter the kick section the physical demands of holding kick postures draws me back to adjusting my

alignment and using the breath to relax through any physical discomfort. I allow myself the option of relaxing the kicking leg if I feel I'm straining to maintain the position or if my balance feels compromised. Over time both my leg strength and balance have improved from holding this section of the form. As I exit the kick section the sensation of warm liquid I felt earlier is now in fact, perspiration.

Section three of the form is made up primarily of pieces of sections one and two interspersed with posture sequences unique to section three. My experience of this part of the form is similar to section two before the kicks--with a notable difference. The kick section has tired my legs sufficiently that in order to 'rest and recover' while continuing the form, all excess tension in the postures must be released. This creates a sink and root quality in my legs and a light, empty sensation in the upper body. Once I get to the Cross Kick and active step Roll Back, Press and Push I become aware the end is near and resist becoming anxious to finish by refocusing on the breath. Soon I am performing Cross Hands and Conclusion. I press the stop button on the timer--run time: seventy-five minutes. I stand in Wu-Chi for a minute or two as I savor the feeling of what I inadequately describe as 'euphoric exhaustion.' Unlike exhaustion from rigorous

external activity that leaves me drained and in need of a long recovery, my physical recovery is rapid and I experience a feeling of well being that increases throughout the day. I have participated in many endurance sports and many styles of martial arts as well as meditation practices. I believe the combination of movement and meditation and the sensations and benefits they produce, are unique to T'ai Chi Ch'uan.

In Conclusion

I would encourage experienced T'ai Chi practitioners to give this practice a try and to create variations of their own. I would caution that there is a physical, even athletic, component to the practice that needs to be incrementally worked up to in order to avoid undue strain or injury. Start with the first section and with less holding time and build the practice from there.

I'm aware of the irony in using a timekeeping tool to experience the sensation of no time. Historically though, in monasteries and temples throughout Asia bells, gongs and other devices were used to signal the beginning and end of extended periods of meditation. Like Master Liang, I view this practice as a means to an end--an enjoyable journey of self-cultivation and discovery that will continue to unfold in ways unique to each and every practitioner. Enjoy.