

Thoughts on Teaching and Learning Martial Arts

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I like the "teach what they can take" approach but also see a need to give a view of what is possible.

A problem exists that where a really good teacher is available every day then the best way is one to one coupled with group work, but with UK students who have to travel long distances and do not practice so much as they might, then it becomes important that they remain 1) motivated and 2) have a way of guiding their practice in a way consistent with their teacher. I guess that ideally the student would grasp the "internal feeling" and learn quickly how to use this as a guide; many of us use our intellect to develop a model which we can then use as a guide when the teacher is not there.

I am aware that physical practice links to the emotional/spiritual and the intellectual but not everyone is open to that - this is one of those "eyes glazing over moments"

The link between health and martial arts is very important, but difficult to understand for people who are prejudiced (even in a nice way) against martial arts. It is difficult to show that the training is the same for both and that the martial background and a "does it work/absorb what is useful" approach are essential to getting the health part right - just as the health aspect is essential to developing the martial effectiveness.

Health training covers physical, emotional/spiritual and intellectual.

Martial arts training covers physical, emotional/spiritual and intellectual

Physical, emotional/spiritual and intellectual growth equals Personal Development - and actually with a much broader scope than the usage of that phrase usually signifies - i.e. normally it is limited to personal development on an emotional level. Intellectual learning is regarded as "education" and physical development as sport or leisure.

Martial Arts seems to have a certain inevitability of direction - start anywhere you like and if you follow and keep following you come to a well-trodden path - there are many cul-de-sacs - but if you can avoid these and keep going then the path goes on forever.

Teachers are still going through the same cycles as beginners, just further on. Students do not understand the implications of this, they want a target, an endpoint - this of course is a potential trap. False summits do give us hope - but also disappointments - we learn in the end to just put one foot in front of the other and enjoy the journey - but how many would take the first step if we knew it was going to start a journey of 10000 miles?

Perhaps rather than searching for a way to reach our students we would be better helping them find a way to reach us?

I think that the translation into western style thinking provided by some teachers has a great deal to offer in terms of making Tai Chi more accessible to western culture - even so reaching students is a filtering process and "teach what they can take" applies to written and spoken material as well as physical work - so a layered approach is perhaps called for. Moving forward the linking of psychology, medical/sports science and analytical modeling all provide connections and endorsement. However that perhaps best reaches those who do well in an educated environment - being able to explain may not be useful to everybody - although they probably find it impressive. Again a layered approach could help. The NLP concept of communication modalities - visual, auditory, kinesthetic seems to be important and I suspect that with Tai Chi it is important for students to experience all modalities whatever their primary communication channel.

Congruence seems to me more and more important - getting the connection between the physical, emotional/spiritual and the intellectual - one augments the other - but to achieve this students need to experience and read material that complements their training - how many are interested/can be bothered?

The real problem is that the subject can be just so damn big! So it may help to break it down into bite sized chunks - like territory maps in different scales.

And philosophy – let's not forget Taoism and (Zen) Buddhism. Actually a desire to make sense of it all got me to eastern philosophy and a fear of violence got me to martial arts - but everyone has their own entry point, and they are each slightly different.

As I look more at Martial Arts I am gradually coming round to see the value of the concept of Chi - it allows us to deal with the whole subject in a sort of shorthand without having to go in depth every time. It is a word that can be picked up as a label (and so manipulated) by those who do not understand (nor wish to) the sub-conscious workings and so in a way everybody is happy. Except of course because we did not have the deeper understanding in a way acceptable to the western mind then it took on the guise of "magic" or perhaps "majik" i.e. linked to the old pagan witchcraft etc.

Now there may be a glimmer of a western understanding of what is behind the Chi label, perhaps that gives us a way forward? It has depended on UK martial arts achieving a measure of maturity – requiring instructors who can build on the simplistic and Japanese/Chinese culturally based transmissions. Perhaps we are now at a point where instructors who were early students in the 1950/60/70s are now good enough to have a proper understanding in their own right.

I remember myself, training in Sun style with Madam Sun in Beijing who insisted on putting us in a posture with weight on one leg and the other forward – a posture referred to as santisoo (?) and practiced with a visualised inner tension - exactly the same as a Yiquan posture - she made detailed corrections all of which improved the balance but also increased the pain - I stood there with her pushing/supporting my back until my upper thigh caught light with pain- she was well into her 80s and just laughed at me in agony and later told of training with her father Sun Lutan for many hours each day and being unable to walk, so literally crawling to bed.

I saw the experience as wholly positive, supportive and humorous - a small sharing of experience with an impressive lady and the lineage she represented, I'm not sure that is a common reaction though.

How do we get the western mind to see that kind of experience as supportive and especially spiritual - given the concentration on monotheistic hierarchical religion as the only mainstream form of spiritual activity?

I remember believing when I started Karate that when I made 1st Dan I'd understand enough. I just couldn't see beyond, I didn't have any examples of people further ahead, the books were completely inadequate/incomprehensible and the instructors either didn't understand themselves or could not explain. Although even then I believe there was a sense of getting hold of something special, something big and amorphous - even for those that keep turning up martial arts seem to be a "mime" – a mental virus type information package - once you have it, it stays with you. If you keep doing it the connections multiply, windows open and new horizons appear -

Just keep turning up - last man standing - we get good because we keep doing it. The trick is to turn up at the right place at the right time - for you. Keep turning up at some classes and you'd go backwards so learning enough to take responsibility for our own training is a major step that early teachers can help with (developing the guru within) . When the time is right, the teacher/student appears.

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