

# **Feedback and Education in Tai Chi and the human experience**

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As a child in a post war western society of the 50's feedback was a very hit and miss affair – sometimes literally – but rarely was there useful guidance – it is only in recent times that the growth and popularisation of western psychology has led to study of human behaviour in anything like scientific observational terms and availability of that knowledge on a widespread basis. Perhaps it was this lack of constructive feedback that led me and many like me in the 60's and 70's looking to the eastern Buddhists and Taoists – early “scientific” students of the natural world - for a knowledge based approach to the human experience.

What was previously a random series of experiences and poorly understood lessons was termed the “school of life” – in fact this was a complete misnomer – there was/is very little teaching and very little learning in life skills – in fact often simply a series of falling into and negotiating traps and tests set by others followed by a struggle to recover from them. Fortunately the knowledge we have now has the potential to greatly enhance the life learning process both externally in our social behaviours and in our internal experiences.

Re-define “objective” in a relative world what does “objective” mean?

How can we be objective about personal reality when all feedback is subjective? When you seek to define the terms then the objectivity goes since the definitions become drawn from the very subjectivity – a bit like quantum physics – you can never measure ( be objective about ) everything – that does not stop quantum theory from being a very good descriptive model of real life. Relativity = western science?

Black box meets reductionism

Neuropsychology

Internal feeling – keeping an objective measure of this feedback – a good and objective memory - the role of the teacher – the role of others.

Feedback in our bodies – the feeling of being embodied and the feedback created by the feelings created in movement.

How we can develop this process in Tai Chi mode. Feeling as feedback – physically and emotionally – to understand the way we move and the influence of our mental, emotional and physical selves on the way we are in the world.

By feeling what is happening in our bodies moment by moment, and relating that to our emotional feelings, then we can adjust our body usage eg posture and movement in minute detail, to improve our comfort and emotional state – doing this on a long term basis can improve our health and temperament by creating new and more comfortable habits.

By practice of an activity such as Tai Chi we can set up repetitive actions which enable us to observe the resulting inner feelings and to observe at the same time the emotions that arise when either moving on our own, or in concert with another. Tai Chi and other soft/internal arts also have within them the specific goal of creating a completely new habit of movement called “internal power” – this is generally sought for reasons of martial arts study – but because it is a way of moving created by allowing the body-mind to find its optimal condition of movement it is also a very healthy state.

To achieve this we need to observe objectively, understand the relation of both internal and external feedback to action and to use this understanding to guide our development.

Feelings are often the only measure that we have – if we learn to understand the reality of our feelings – physical and emotional – and their interactions – then we can develop ourselves and our society.

The goal? – resilient strength in all our human experiences – wisdom – personally and as a society. The path – change, development.

Negative feedback – positive feedback - and the role of stability. Fear as a switch from one state to the other. Strangely the more frequently useful is termed “negative” – the role of positive feedback in disturbing/destroying the status quo and moving us on to another stage.

A common life cycle – eg global warming – self regulating systems with external influences – islands of stability with the capability for chaos and catastrophe.

The blame culture – this is not feedback!

Guilt – making ourselves feel bad - to feel good about ourselves

Blame – telling others to feel bad so we can feel good about ourselves

Child development – small course corrections – information and constructive feedback.

Criminal justice system. When there are no course corrections or they don't work Rehabilitation – behaviour change via feedback. Retribution is not feedback.

The next step – how can we use this knowledge?

The human path of life and development – fulfilment, harmony and happiness. Life stages. E.g. the 8 fold way.

A unified paradigm which enables us to make sense of reality and our being within it – the positive and negative in harmony – so that we can grow as human beings. A practical philosophy that aids us in our internal and external lives.

As every there are two sides to feedback – the transmission and the reception.

Feedback is often transmitted as blame ( with the intent to make the other feel bad ) – sometimes concealed in politeness – and often presented politely in the belief and fear that feedback is blaming or will be received as such – there is a fear of simply being honest. Feedback is often received with reluctance – for fear that it is blame in disguise and there is generally an inability to handle the truth.

There is also a great reluctance to give generalised feedback or “advice” on a personal basis – although many of us seek out the popular psychology books and a huge amount of “sharing” magazines are consumed daily.

Simple mentoring stuff is missing e.g. tooth care – dentists will tell clients what they should do but not explain why – so there is no understanding and no motivation. There is poor feedback, really only instruction – no feedback of understanding only of conclusion.

Stuff like how to look after your body and how to understand the emotional rollercoaster that we encounter through life.

- how to give feedback in a clear blame free way.
- how to receive feedback without seeing it as criticism.
- Criticism as feedback – being critical in a positive way.

The role of counselling, life coaches, teachers, gurus etc in negotiating day to day life – interpreters of events which may provide feedback.

There are problems associated with feedback: –

- the sometimes dramatic and damaging nature of the response to even small actions – the penalty of “asking a question “ in Tai Chi or other martial art can be physical pain and damage.
- in other cases the feedback can take so long to arrive that it is too late to learn from.

This is where the role of education comes in – by passing on the feedback experiences of others gathered over relatively long time periods we get to shortcut to process instead of having to re-invent everything from the ground up on our own. So education is a sort of feedback by proxy – unfortunately the lessons are not so direct and are often difficult to understand especially at an emotional level – such lessons can easily become purely intellectual and “dis-embodied”.

Feedback in physiological structures is well documented e.g. development of the visual cortex depends on the experience of seeing – it is inhibited if the child is kept from seeing e.g. by being kept in the dark.

Bone density and size are affected by the habitual loading placed upon them – and can be seen to operate both in the short term and over archaeological time. Muscle of course responds to lack of use and to work done.

Tai Chi instructors feedback cycle –

By placing their body in the students posture and by copying their way of moving a Tai Chi instructor can compare with how they themselves stand and move and so understand what is required to move the student from their present state to that which is desired.

The teacher may then adjust the student’s body with that in view and direct their movement to positive change.

Likewise the student can learn by studying the posture and movement of the teacher, by mirroring their movement and studying differences the student can direct their own change. In addition by putting themselves in the student’s posture and movement the teacher may gain some insight into underlying physical and emotional states i.e. if I stand like you and move like you then I will actually feel like you in some degree.

We talk about “knowing your own mind” – perhaps “knowing your own body” would be more useful – in that if we know in our mind what our body needs then we can seek to achieve it.