

The Learning Process & Internal Energy

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The basic of basics is relaxation. Relaxation is crucial to internal martial art training, but it must be approached in an appropriate manner in order for helpful progress to be made.

Tai Chi promotes that beginners should start with learning how to be relaxed. When you are relaxed, power will develop naturally, however, most beginners will admit that relaxation is not easy to achieve. At first remembering the movements may seem the most difficult, but it soon becomes clear that relaxation is the problem. It is easy for the instructors to shout, 'Relax'. But it is just not easy to do it.

Sometimes students will become impatient and ask the instructor, 'How do I relax?'

Relaxation does not give in to shouts.

Even young people have trouble relaxing. For those people who start to study later in life, it is no wonder they find the ability to relax difficult. They have had years to build up stress and tenseness, and can't expect to learn how to let go in seconds, minutes or even days. On the other hand some people seem to be starting right with the ability to look soft and dance like. It might be better than being stiff but their relaxation may be only superficial and not developed in an internal martial art sense.

Stiff joints and tense movements are the starting point. It is in the process of turning gradually from rigid to relaxed that produces the greatest pleasure and benefits.

Relaxation can be approached from three directions, strength, joints and mind.

Some people resort to pretending to exert no strength by imagining their body is weak and half collapsed. The most interesting suggestion I have ever heard was to go jogging immediately before tai chi training. Therefore, when the body is tired, there will be no strength. In fact, exerting strength in the right way is an inevitable part of doing Tai Chi correctly. Pretending to be weak does not mean you are relaxed.

Using strength correctly, while remaining relaxed can take many years to conquer. Many Tai Chi practitioners will never learn this skill. It depends on the authenticity of the heritage and practice. The sudden cut-off of strength means soft and weak which are both obstacles to the practice, and in any case it would not develop the kind of relaxation required. There must be strength in the body. There is strength even when lying down. A person doesn't need to tense their muscles and joints to be strong.

When strength is executed through relaxation, building up perpetual momentum, strength becomes power. Tensed up muscles, means you forfeit strength. Relaxed spirals and circular movements must be trained again and again in order to build up the free flowing momentum to develop power. Qi flow felt in relaxation provides a feeling of travelling momentum and helps to build up that momentum of power. When power is propelled internally from the centre core, Dantian, with a stretch of qi, and exercised through the body and limbs, then it is internal power.

However these profound theories and

unimaginable internal feelings could never be explained in a few words or even thousands of words. There seem to be an endless evolution in internal feeling at each level of advancement. Nevertheless, relaxing muscle strength and starting with the basics might better initiate the internal achievement of power, and of course relaxing muscle strength is different from softening muscles.

Tai chi movement itself is structured for the purpose of relaxing the whole person, body and spirit. The slow circular motions and movements when practiced and familiarised with a good posture will actually lessen the desire to hit with strength.

Yet the reverse must not prevail, that is, thinking that the slow motion itself is a way of carrying mysterious inlaid strength to hit.

The internal energy, qi, will come along when strength starts to retreat. As qi begins to build up, it concurs with the momentum in the movements and is substituted for the force that has been solely reliant upon muscle strength. Qi takes over the role gradually and strength diminishes.

However, Tai Chi still uses strength, even if it is minimal. You use strength to get into a posture and while smoothing out movements, and it happens unnoticeably. As long as qi is thought of as creating the power, it will stop working and the use of physical strength will return, the body will tense up again.

There is an accumulation of gong, internal achievements. When the circular motions in the movements and techniques are well trained and relaxed joints are rotated smoothly, the

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He studied with many great Masters, including: Master Zhu Bao Lin, the son of Grand Master Zhu Tian Cai of Chen Style Tai Chi, Master Kenneth Liu of Fu Style Ba Gua Zhang, a China National 8th Duan of WuShu, Taoist Feng Wei Xin, the 19th inheritor of Quan Zhen Dragon Gate, Taoist Wang Ping, the 26th inheritor of Wudang Sanfeng Natural.

Master Lok is the founder of The Natural Energy Academy in Hong Kong. He also spends time teaching in America and England. His book Phoenix in Graceful Clouds Of Blessing, describes how Qi Gong can circulate and regulate the flow of internal energy through the 8 channels and 12 meridians of the body according to Chinese Medical Heritage. By doing this he believes we can live tranquil lives, have healthy bodies and accept blessings from nature.





more flowing will be the qi and less strength is needed to execute a motion. At first, qi follows the movements through the exercise by intention. Later, qi overrides strength and takes over as the major constituent of momentum. At the advanced stage the qi flow runs ahead and the body and limbs catch up.

This does not happen on day one. It builds up gradually. It is meaningless to try to check out how much power has accumulated since yesterday. One day you may find unexpectedly that power has replaced strength. Before power is felt, it is impossible to imagine what this feeling of power could be like. It is unbelievably unimaginable and the feeling changes at different stages of the progress.

If there is not an internal flow of power, lookalike imitation of emitting internal power could just be commanded with strength, however relaxed. Lookalike imitation of emitting internal power at short distance could just be commanded with stiff strength.

Many years ago I read an old book on xing yi boxing, the boxing in form and intention, written by a highly respected master about a hundred years ago. He suggested that the internal power in xing yi was the result of the uniform motion from simultaneous actions in all parts of the body driven by the centre core.

It sounded theoretical but not too complicated or not at all mysterious in describing the profound impression of internal martial art. In fact, uniform body coordination is a common requirement in many kinds of martial art or actually many other sports. But the uniformity trained out from xing yi is another matter.

It was not until many years of my practicing internal martial art that the feeling began to develop. The cohesion of the inside achievement and outside motions contribute to the uniformity in the exercise of power from the centre core in the absence of muscle strength but operated by the stretch of 'one' qi. When I went back into the book again, it seemed to be revealing a different level of kung fu completely.

Movements can be worked on, but the coming of power could not be pre-planned. The more it is bothered about, the longer it takes.

This is Tao.

Some branches of xing yi boxing suggest that beginners should start with apparent strength. It is when the apparent strength reaches its peak, the inner power will begin to develop gradually and tensed up muscle strength will diminish and will be replaced by relaxation over time. Afterwards, relaxation triggers power. It is very true. In the extreme of strength the greatest thrusting force is felt. It is the strongest instant of the body. In turning to softer gestures there would be approximations on the farthest point to stop and turn round. That is the point.

Perhaps another good point of this suggestion is that the bones and muscles get trained up first. When proceeding to something else there are already some trump cards in your hand.

The most common misunderstanding in the slow movement practice is to leave some parts of the body hanging stiff, avoiding any sign of movement as if light and exercising no strength. These parts tend to be the shoulders, hips and wrists. Actually every joint and muscle throughout the body should be moving all the time. Every nerve is exercised. Every vein is massaged by qi. There is no need to keep the arms very still in the air and train only the waist movement from the start. Otherwise the movements will be robotic. There has got to be a beginners' stage. Without the beginners' stage there will be no advancement. It should start with swinging the arms, the arms following the body movements but without deliberately tensing up the muscles and joints as if there is immense power created. There is never a martial art anywhere in the world promoting tensing up.

The biggest obstacle in learning tai chi, but not so much as in ba gua or xing yi, is in the usual slow speed itself. Many instructors or demonstrators sometimes slow down the slow motions to let students see the movements more clearly.

Some instructors might not realize their own joints are rotating freely even when they move in a still manner. But they sometimes wonder why their students are so stiff.

Students might not realize the instructor's joints are rotating if their attention is not brought to this fact. Beginners often don't notice the rotation of elbows and hips when watching a demonstration. They may have the impression of the movements having stiff shoulders, rod like arms, still wrists and plastered fingers, exercising no strength, but yet, with mysterious power!

Many students hard copy from this impression and reproduce the stiffened version sincerely. But they have forgotten they do not stiffen themselves in doing many other activities in normal life. Then the instructors will come round to show the correction magic and receive appreciations from the lost students.

Slow motion has a role to play in developing Tai Chi's mysterious power, but it is not the major role. The major role is in the design of the movements themselves, as well as good posture and an understanding of the theories behind the movements, for developing internal energy and power.

Slow motions allow more leeway for relaxation and tuning the breath so that it is easy not to be tired or panting. Slow motions allow more time to feel in order to get used to the momentum going through every part of the complicated body in the process of gathering and transmitting power. Therefore in executing the momentum, the body itself would not be an obstacle to the route of power.

If the inborn natural body rhythm is lost, stiffened motions will not help a beginner's progress at all.

You can find information about Master Lok on his website www.joelok.com and he has several videos on YouTube.