

Tai Chi Connections - John Loupos

Rooting

For the most part, I regard balance to be a subset of rooting during Tai Chi practice. Rooting, more so than any other aspect is T'ai Chi's defining quality? This is because good rooting is requisite to efficient transfer of earth force through your body. While balancing on the earth is certainly necessary for stability in certain postures, rooting requires that we connect to the earth. Rooting, therefore, requires more of us than merely not succumbing to the earth's gravitational forces. Rooting is what allows us to transfer force through our bodies to or from the earth in a manner that is optimally efficient. Rooting, as a T'ai Chi quality that is dynamic versus static, is most readily accomplished by applying your clear intention and concentrated attention to body/mind nuances, and adjusting yourself accordingly. Adjustments of this kind can only be learned while moving at a pace much slower than life's normal cadence.

Chi

Another determining factor in how our lives unfold is Chi (Qi). Each of us has Chi, or life force energy. Chi is what animates us as living beings. Yet, most people move through their lives without ever feeling or recognizing their own Chi. One reason for this is that stress causes tension in our bodies, and tension both impedes the balanced flow of Chi and precludes the quality of attention necessary to sense its subtleties. Modern life, in general, discourages this level of sensitivity. The world outside is vast and seemingly unrelenting in its demands on our attention. The Five Thieves (the five senses) are busier than ever, meaning there is ever-decreasing incentive to attend to our own internal processes. Direct awareness of your Chi usually hinges on the quality of your attention to the world within, a world that can be every bit as comprehensive and variable as the world outside, not to mention a good deal more relevant to you on a personal level. Here, again, T'ai Chi effects us both directly and indirectly: indirectly, through its slowness, by fostering a more focused awareness of our world within; and directly by realigning our bodies in healthier and more natural ways, so that our Chi can flow through its various energy pathways unimpeded to re-establish a natural state of balance rather than one of stuckness or polarization.

Breathing

Momentum generally precludes conscious attention to the breath. This is unfortunate because proper breathing is crucial to any cultivation, or even just maintenance, of balanced Chi. Moving our bodies slowly gives us the opportunity to breathe in the best way, that is to say fully. This, in turn, lends support to all the body's many functions, including the aforementioned balance and rooting (which lowers the center of gravity), and stress mitigation (which activates the body's parasympathetic nervous response). Slow, deep breathing also contributes to good overall fitness (which will be discussed elsewhere) because deeper and fuller breathing uses more complete lung capacity to oxygenate all of the body's tissues more efficiently. Most people take breathing for granted and only develop good habits around breathing as a result of some insight or new interest (e.g. meditation or yoga) that encourages conscious breathing. Conscious breathing is a good habit to have. Yet, there is one potential drawback to conscious breathing in that conscious breathing requires your conscious attention. For many people the level of attention required for conscious breathing represents more work than they are prepared to commit to. Fortunately, good breathing skills need not result only from conscientious attention to the breath. The slow moves of T'ai Chi have a way of influencing, indeed governing, the breath when practiced over any extended study. It goes without saying that mindful awareness of all our many aspects is an important, and desirable, feature of T'ai Chi. Yet it is nice to know that even if your mind wanders a bit, proper breathing can still occur as a consequence of just moving slowly in a T'ai Chi way.

Critical Thinking

Finally, there is a quality that allows us to fully appreciate and make the best use of all the other qualities and benefits—critical thinking. Aside from T'ai Chi, critical thinking occurs in some people quite naturally, and for others it can develop as a learned skill. However, the slowness of T'ai Chi fosters a different sort of critical thinking. T'ai Chi's slowness serves as vantage point from which critical attention can be focused inward. It stands to reason you can't think critically about something that you're not thinking about. Due to the brain's natural filtering mechanisms few people have any incentive to spend time or effort thinking about the intricacies of their body's inner workings, or of the role their mind plays (attention/intention) in influencing their body's behavior. During T'ai Chi practice your attention and intention are consciously and deliberately trained on your more internal self. One consequence of this is that your ability for self-perception becomes heightened and honed, which encourages critical thinking to occur intrapersonally. In some cases this can actually result in profound insight and accelerated leaps in personal consciousness. I, personally, can attest to having had the experience of extrasensory awareness during my practice of the T'ai Chi form. Less dramatically, T'ai Chi's slowness, and the consequent reassessment of your personal priorities, can lead to a more conscientious attunement of your own humanitarian values.

Concepts to Remember:

- Congruence is what we all seek.
- Congruence means your various aspects reinforce each other.

- Congruence prevails naturally in the Dao.
- We begin life naturally congruent.
- T'ai Chi is all about congruence.
- Process entails an attention to how's and why's, not just results.
- Small improvements in life and in T'ai Chi lead to more encompassing reforms.
- Assume nothing, question everything.
- Show up with a student's mind.
- Congruence carries no guarantee of end result.

There Are No Transitions in T'ai Chi

Often, the various moves of T'ai Chi are thought of as specific, easily identifiable, and clearly delineated postures: Single Whip, Snake Creeps Down, Crane Spreads Wings, and so on. This impression is reinforced by the manner in which T'ai Chi is usually depicted in the various texts—still pictures of practitioners posing in these same postures. Between these well-known postures occur what are usually referred to as "transitions." Transitions comprise all the "stuff that exists between postures and are the means by which we segue from one posture into the next. However, more than mere filler, transitions are every bit as essential and defining to T'ai Chi as are the more celebrated and recognizable Single Whips, et al. The truth is that there is very little difference, from the perspective of T'ai Chi essences, between the more recognizable postures and the transitions that separate them. The individual postures have particular value to the extent that they highlight certain positions for their martial application as fighting techniques or, in some cases, for physical development or for inducing energy flow within the body. Still, it is the transitions between postures that bring these techniques alive. One way to picture this is to imagine your T'ai Chi form as a road map or communications grid map for North America. Your individual postures are like cities and towns (highlighted on the map by black dots), which are places where lots of energy tends to congregate as busyness, such as destination or departure points. The busyness of one city is only sustained in its relationship with other cities by the pathways (transportation routes and communication systems) between them. The more developed these pathways are, the better the commerce (energy exchange) is between places where energy congregates. So it is with T'ai Chi.

Your Initial Connection

Probably, a very appropriate place to begin our discussion on connections and transitions is at the beginning. Our first point of focus, therefore, will be on the opening move, which in most versions of the T'ai Chi form entails raising your arms and hands up in front of your body and then lowering them back down. Stylistic differences notwithstanding, if you can apply the theoretical mechanics of body structure to this first move, you will enhance your execution of it no matter what type of T'ai Chi you practice.

Your Guy-Wire Connection

A recurring theme for many practitioners is the challenge of keeping yourself reliably rooted, or even just balanced, as you transition from posture to posture during form practice. One very helpful technique for developing a firm "rooted-ness" is to visualize parts of your body as having (or even as being) guy wires extending down to the earth. Guy wires, if you are not familiar with the term, are those stabilizing cables that can be seen anchoring and securing high wire towers or circus tents to prevent them from being toppled over by wind.

Wave Hands Like Clouds, But You Still Gotta Step Right

The move known as Wave Hands Like Clouds is one of T'ai Chi's most beautiful and recognizable sequences. Just as there are different versions and styles of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, so are there numerous ways of interpreting the role of the arms in this particular pattern: small circles, big circles, close in, or extended away from the body. Cloud Hands, as it is often called, can be downright hypnotic to the casual observer. Almost universally, the primary focus of attention while watching, or even practicing, this move falls on the hands and arms which are, after all, waving. Small wonder.

What I would ask you to pay attention to here, though, is not the hands, but the footwork that accompanies this pattern. In particular, pay attention to the foot with which you step out. I've heard some debate about the correct way to step during Cloud Hands, regarding which part of the stepping foot, exactly, touches down to the ground first, and this has prompted a good deal of reflection on the matter. What I have concluded is that there are three acceptable variations for determining precisely how you step. Some people step out with the toes extended and touch the toes down first and then the heel. Other folks step out to touch with the heel first, setting the foot down heel to toe. And some practitioners prefer to reach out to touch the whole flat of the foot down at once.

A Shortcut That Makes Sense: The T'ai Chi Punch

Shortcuts can be a mixed blessing. Sometimes they work out for the best, and other times not. If a shortcut backfires, it can end up being more labor or time intensive than the original course of action you might have taken. Shortcuts can also be activity dependent. For example, in psychotherapy shortcuts may very well prove counterproductive. This is because a results-oriented approach often interferes with the growth and insight that, by design, stem from the therapeutic process. The same might be said of certain artistic or creative endeavors

for which efficiency and expediency is not the primary goal. Indeed, there are certain aspects of T'ai Chi that do not lend themselves to shortcuts—aspects where the opportunity for deeper comprehension and mastery would be undermined were they not allowed to evolve on their own, uninterrupted, over time.

Feeling Your Ward Off Connection

Among the most common flaws in technique that I observe in practitioners, even those who are more experienced, are lapses (or outright absences) in structural continuity. Structure is not merely an end point quality, such as might occur at the conclusion of a move. It is a dynamic to be observed throughout every move. I emphasize this point because students newer to Tai Chi are often held accountable for their structure in only that manner, as some quality they must display at the conclusion of this move or that. It is unfortunate then, but only natural, that the student's expression of his or her grasp of structure remains limited to the conclusion, or termination point, of individual techniques. From a practical point of view, being able to express a grasp of your connected structure only as a static quality, such as occurs at the endpoint of a move, is of little value other than as a bench mark along your path of learning. In contrast, other techniques such as Rollback or Split entail a more deliberate engagement of your waist as a means of torquing your opponent off his center line. With techniques such as these, your intention may be to control your opponent, to manage or manhandle him, rather than simply repulse him. These techniques have a "tighter thread weave" and may require a bit more twisting of the screw, allowing you to exploit or borrow force from your opponent (which can then be applied back against him). Consequently, whatever torquing force you generate can be issued against your opponent more with the idea of rerouting him than of repulsing him outright. Now, getting back to the earth as your screwdriver, all you need in order to generate force for a powerful strike outward is a quarter turn or less, or for a rerouting force perhaps just a bit more of a twist. Most importantly, remember to draw your force from the earth, at your root, rather than muscling force through from your waist, back, or shoulders. In the next chapter we will examine in greater detail how to align your body so as to actually acquire this type of skill.

Rootedness as a Foundation for Issuing Force

Learning how to root yourself is one of T'ai Chi's most essential skills. In fact, the quality of one's rootedness is often what separates more serious and accomplished T'ai Chi students from novices and casual practitioners. Attaining a feeling of rootedness or connectedness to the earth is an important milestone for students. I provided detailed guidance in my first book *Inside Tai Chi* (Loupos 2002) on how to acquire your root. Even so, having a sense of rootedness and then learning how to take full advantage of that rootedness for the purpose of issuing force outward from your body are two different matters. Rootedness itself is but a first step, so to speak. Before I proceed with guidance on an exercise designed to help you learn how to use your earth root connection specifically for issuing force outward, let me define my terms a bit. For readers newer to T'ai Chi, the idea of "issuing force outward" may seem to have something of a martial connotation about it. Rest easy if you are not a fighter, as I don't mean to alienate those of you lacking a martial background, orientation, or ambition. The truth is that nearly everything you do with your body involves issuing force outward in some manner or another. Just getting yourself up and out of bed in the morning means you must issue force against the pull of the earth's gravity in order to stand up and not fall back down. Simple stepping, one foot after the other, involves your pushing force down against the earth, as do more complex tasks such as carrying your groceries in from the car, doing chores around the house, or riding your bicycle. In each case, it is necessary to push against the earth either directly as in walking or indirectly as in bicycling in order to move force, first through, and then from your body so as to propel yourself in any direction. Unless you are lying down, sitting immobile, or making use of isometric force or the like, the efficiency of whatever you are doing is ultimately dependent on how you connect to the earth. It would make sense then, given the global presence of this dynamic in your life, to get it right. As a T'ai Chi practitioner, you will want to transfer force through and from your body in a manner that is optimally efficient. Herein lies the great value of T'ai Chi, with its emphasis on form practice and auxiliary training methods. In this chapter, I will guide you in learning one of these auxiliary training methods as a means of moving force through your body with ease and efficiency.

Getting Started: Part 1

I will describe each partner's role individually, and in detail, prior to describing the roles of both partners together. The terms clockwise and counter clockwise have the potential to be misleading as they are perspective dependent. For the purpose of clarity, and unless noted otherwise, my descriptions will stem from the perspective of being positioned behind the partner designated as the aggressor. In your imagination, you will be following the aggressor as if from behind, thus sparing yourself any need to reverse or otherwise reconfigure in your mind the instructions given.

Part 2, will entail partner A (still you) reversing direction and moving your same (right) arm counter-clockwise from six o'clock, past five o'clock, and so on, extending all the way up, over, and back to your starting position at six o'clock. However, before we tackle part 2, let's back up for just a moment to the beginning of part 1. To avoid the confusion that would have ensued had I given you too many details to focus on at one time, I deliberately omitted the directions for the accompanying footwork. Now that you have the pattern for your arm movements, we need to add in that footwork prior to reversing our pattern.

The Return Trip: Part 2

Now we will begin to reverse the pattern with part 2. Sorry to say, the return trip is not quite as simple as doing everything you just did in part 1 in mirror image. Previously, the arm that you moved corresponded at first to your back foot: right arm together with right foot. Now, as you begin part 2 using that same right arm, your starting position has your opposite (left) foot to the rear instead of your right foot (Figure 6-10). This will require some modifications as you prepare to arc your leading arm and rotate your body counter-clockwise, back around to its original starting position.

Putting It All Together

Now that you have learned parts 1 and 2, it is time to put this together with your training partner. From here on it is as simple as coordinating your side of what you have just learned with your partner's side. You, as the aggressor, will start right back at the very beginning with your right wrist positioned inside (beneath) your partner's right wrist. For ease of reference, we will designate your partner B as the resister. As the aggressor, you need only follow exactly the directions previously outlined for part 1. While you are enacting part 1 your partner will be assuming the more passive role by providing a measured resistance against your efforts to arc your arm up and over.

Momentum is Unavoidable

Momentum is an unavoidable fact of life. Anytime you shift your body in one direction or another, there is a certain momentum that accompanies your movement. This is in accordance with Newton's first law of motion: Every object in a state of uniform motion tends to remain in that state of motion unless an external force is applied to it. However, not all momentum is the same. In the context of T'ai Chi practice, I stipulate a distinction between momentum that is automatic and unconscious, as compared to momentum that has a basis in mindfulness and intent. It is, therefore, how we use our momentum that determines its propriety. Even though all movement carries with it a certain momentum, in T'ai Chi we seek to minimize our reliance on momentum as a dictating factor in how our technique unfolds. Rather, we T'ai Chi'ers should prefer that any momentum be incidental to our movement and only in consequence to mindful attention and intention.

Momentum in Lieu of...

Like so many other impairments to T'ai Chi, momentum is usually a compensatory dynamic. Momentum is often employed, albeit unconsciously, as a substitute or good technique and, as well, in compensation for its absence. If your body lacks a strong foundation in muscle and tendon support, or if your joints are not opening flexible to a point that they allow for pinpoint precision and control, momentum may be what you inadvertently rely on where good technique is wanting.

Momentum in Class

Another consideration that you as a T'ai Chi student, and even more so if you are a teacher, may want to stay aware of is the momentum of any given class format or manner of teaching. Naturally, different teachers have different ways of presenting material and working with students. But if the classes you attend, or conduct, follow more or less the same predictable pattern class after class then the chances are that your classes are predicated at least somewhat on momentum. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, no more so than with any other occurrence of momentum, as long as you are aware of it and don't get stuck there. You might want to get in the habit, though, of occasionally asking yourself if your needs, or the ongoing needs of your students, are being well met by this approach?

Momentum of Your Mind

I would be remiss in covering this topic if I neglected to at least introduce the concept of momentum as a dynamic of the mind. The first seed of an idea for writing about momentum occurred to me as I was advising a student to beware the inappropriate momentum he displayed while demonstrating his form. I thought, "Hmm, I'll bet it would be great for readers if I could put together a short essay on this topic." I was thinking perhaps five hundred words, or so, my minimum for a short essay. As it turned out, the more I wrote about momentum the more my writing was taken over by the very quality I was writing about. Five hundred words stretched to a thousand, and then to twice that. It dawned on me as I wrote just how pervasive momentum is as an inadvertent and unconscious dynamic in the way people practice their T'ai Chi, whether in T'ai Chi form practice or in its other manifestations. For all the aforementioned reasons, momentum can be problematic as a physical dynamic, but also as a mental and psychological impediment to both your practice and to living your Tai Chi. Naturally, just as your mind and body mirror each other in so many other ways, so will they mirror each other in any tendency toward momentum. In order to effectively manage the momentum of your body during T'ai Chi, you must also pay attention for any tendency toward mental or emotional momentum.

Turn Your Foot to Open the Door

I described the essential features and offered detailed instructions for basic T'ai Chi stepping in my first book, *Inside Tai Chi* (Loupos 2002) so I needn't repeat that all description here. But it will behoove you to recall the first (of several) most important points I made: in preparation for lifting your back leg and foot prior to stepping forward, you must first lift your toes and turn your front foot, angling it outward.

Aligning Your Knee

Your second big concern is keeping your knee aimed correctly in relation to the foot below. The key here simply is to point your knee in the same direction as its foot, keeping it aligned throughout your step. To do otherwise compromises your tee structure and, by extension, the structure of everything above it. The degree which you actually flex your knee varies from having it bent fully forward over your toes prior to sinking back, to having it completely straight once you have sunk ck in preparation to turn your foot, to bending it again as you begin to shift your weight forward. Regardless of the degree of flex, take care to maintain your knee as aimed in the same direction that your foot is pointing. Also, try to avoid over bending your knee beyond the toes (Figures 8-4a and b). Finally, you want to avoid angling your knee either to the inside or to the outside of your foot (Figures 8-5a, and c). Any of these errors weaken the stability of your stance, at the least, and the case of lateral misalignment you may actually jeopardize the stability of the knee joint itself.

Opening Your Kua to Pass through the Door

Your third most important consideration in stepping forward is your kua, the location of which is indicated on either side of your centerline by your increase. In previous writing (Loupos 2002, 91-92), I noted the pivotal role of the kua in facilitating smooth and fluid movement throughout you form. I have especially noted the (correct role of the kua in curbing the usual Beginners' tendency to bounce during transitions (Loupos 2002, 83-89).

Move Slow, Move Fast

You can also experiment with varying the pace of your practice. T'ai Chi is usually practiced slowly, but slowness is relative in any case. You might try decelerating your form (so that it requires more practice time) by increments of several minutes at a time, assuming you practice the long form, or by smaller increments if you practice a shorter version, such as the 24-move form. When you opt to experiment with a slower pace, be attentive to the quality (internal nuances) as well as the quantity (actual pace) of your form. Previously (chapter 1), I discussed the idea of opportunities in slowness. Of the many variables discussed, most are themselves subject to adjustment and variation according to just how slow you go. During any relatively faster version of your practice, be sure to pay special heed to your body's larger joints, both for safety and for special readjustments. Also, you will find that adding pace to your form will challenge the ability of your muse to keep all the different parts of your body coordinated and to keep you flowing smoothly from your center. This will be especially so over the course of any pi longed practice session as your muscles inevitably fatigue.

Be Soft

In addition to experimenting with the pace of your form, you might also t varying the amount of force you employ. T'ai Chi is generally regarded as "soft" but this, of course, is a relative quality just like any other. During any practice session, the softness with which you execute your moves can vary considerably. This may happen naturally in reflection of your mood or your energy level whether emotional, mental, or physical, or you may deliberately adjust your level of softness, or lack thereof, according to a predetermined agenda. In all likelihood, you already have a certain standard quality of softness commensurate with your ability with which you normally carry out your practice. You can depart from that standard by trying to relax and soften your moves even moi so than usual. The list that follows contains a number of suggestions for how you can soften your practice. In each case, try to apply the given suggestion with your hands first as your hands quite naturally command your attention due to the leading role in most movements. Then use that feeling of more relaxed softness i your hands as a model, or cue, for softening the rest of your movement.

1. Try breathing through the pores of your skin into your bones.
2. Try to expand and elasticize your joints.
3. Feel yourself displacing, minimally, the air you move through.
4. "Listen" with your hands.
5. Let your hands flow through the air in the lightest possible way.

Bring Your Power to the Surface

Softness and power are not mutually exclusive features. It is possible for you to have and to express both these qualities in your T'ai Chi. Most practitioners an aware, even if not through their own direct personal experience, that T'ai Chi ha; the potential for great expressions of power, as in its fabled fa jin force. But few practitioners attain, or even come near to attaining, real T'ai Chi power. There seems to be a widespread presumption that practicing slowly and softly will eventually, and somehow automatically, lead to great power and speed as resources in one's practice. Not so. Slowness and softness merely set the stage so that you can then proceed to develop power and speed in a manner congruent with T'ai Chi principles. The development of real power and real speed happens only after you have developed a body that is able to move fluidly and from your center. Learn to move your body with efficiency first through slowness and softness. Then you have l basis for learning how to move with power and speed. The gulf between slowness/softness and power/speed is no short span. Years of practice may be required before you achieve a reasonable command of these more advanced skills.

Shake to Your Root

Another way you can improve your T'ai Chi is by vibrating yourself through your form as a way to feel your body connected and rooted. The best way for me o explain this approach is to draw on the example of tall buildings

that have been built to resist damage by earthquakes. Instead of having foundations that are rigid and unyielding these buildings have enormous springs built into their foundations s shock absorbers. These springs allow the buildings to rock a bit when the earth oils. No matter how the earth quakes, these buildings just roll with the punches. You too can benefit through feeling yourself as if rooted onto shock absorbers.

Stationary shaking and vibrating in one form or another is something I have known all my most skilled teachers to rely on, either for its benefits as a healing method or as a means of loosening the body, both physically and energetically. Stationary shaking is a standard element in my pre-class warm up routines. I also like to make shaking, or its subtler expression as a shiver like vibration, an occasion-Li part of my moving practice. Every now and then during form practice, I'll practice vibrating my whole body, not in a continuous nonstop manner, but as a means of occasionally checking and challenging my root and my body alignment. When I do this, the vibration in my legs reinforces my root, as if I am preparing to launch an attack off either leg. You may also notice places in your body that fail to shake or vibrate freely due to tightness, stagnation, or stress. Identifying problems areas is the first step in implementing corrective measures. Vibrating through your form will help you attune to your body and free yourself of tension all at once.

External Variables

In most cases the variables with which you will be concerned are internal: shaking, power, range of movement, etc. However, the environmental conditions under which you practice can also have an effect on your experience during any given practice session. One important consideration may be whether your practice is indoors or outdoors. For example, if you are indoors what type of flooring do practice on? Carpet, wood, and concrete vary in the support and traction they afford you. Over the long term, flooring surfaces can also have an impact on your ankles, knees, and back. If you practice outside, is quite possible that the weather and temperature conditions under which you practice are a consideration. There are few experiences I enjoy more than starting out on a warm, sunny spring morning with some pond-side T'ai Chi practice. However, I live in New England, so spring is but a passing fancy and weather conditions tend to be fickle. I have been known to practice on my pond when it is frozen solid with just a frosting of snow, but generally I'm disinclined to practice on snow or ice. Outdoors your terrain can also affect practice. Lawns, beaches, parking lots, rooftops, and uneven surfaces all have their own unique feel and challenge to them.

Forget Yourself

"Forget yourself," is advice I have often heard my teachers give in the past. Like many of the tidbits I have gleaned from them and fellow teachers (or students) along the way, I tend to extrapolate my own meaning from these gems. "Forget yourself," is advice pretty much intended to mean that we should practice our T'ai Chi without ego and learn to pay attention deep down inside to what is going on in our innermost selves with our bodies, our minds, and also the Chi energy flowing through our acupuncture meridians. This advice is all well and good, and we should all be so fortunate as to reach this pinnacle of selflessness through total self-awareness in our training. However, like many such dictums, the meaning can be applied variously and according to circumstances. Right now, for example, I am thinking of interpreting the meaning of "forget yourself quite literally. I am referring to those embarrassing and woeful moments when, suddenly, in the midst of doing your form along with others, you look around and realize that the whole rest of the class is practicing the wrong move, or so you wish! Forgetting where one is in the form is quite common for novices and beginners who simply do not have their movement sequences hardwired into their bodies yet. For newer level students "forgetting" is just it what implies: forgetting. Newer students forget their form, yes, but not themselves. For more advanced practitioners, though, the surreal observation that your body is not at all where it is "supposed" to be may stem from causes other than simple memory failure. Certainly, any practitioner, regardless of skill level, can bring distracting baggage to his or her practice and fall out of step with the intended lesson at hand. But sometimes what happens is that you can just become so fully absorbed in the deeper aspects of your practice that your body zigs when everyone else's zags, and it is perfectly okay because you are still doing T'ai Chi. That is, until you realize your detour, and your bubble pops. Though I have worked with many prominent and skilled T'ai Chi masters over the years, I have yet to encounter a master level teacher who is immune to this tendency. Even the best teachers incur occasional "memory lapses." No matter. By my way of thinking this simply serves as a reminder that even the most highly skilled teachers are, after all, human. What to do when this happens to you? Well, obviously, you should "forget yourself." That is, let go of any ego attachment to the situation and just get back with the program. Holding on to dismay or self-judgment because you have missed a couple of moves only compounds any error. Once an error is manifest there is no undoing it, so chuckle, get over it, and move on to the next correct posture.

Mining Your T'ai Chi for Gold

One of my pet interests over the years has been the precious metals mining industry, specifically the gold sector. You might call it a romantic nostalgia for days of yore when prospectors combed the hillsides panning for their fortunes. Of course, today's industry is far removed from pack mules and gold pans. Still, from my perspective as a T'ai Chi teacher, I see some very interesting comparison between the two endeavors. In both cases—mining for gold and learning Tai Chi—success lies largely in one's ability to sift though impurities in

order to end up with only the best stuff. This one similarity aside, there appears to be an inverse correlation between the process of mining ore for gold and the process of mining T'ai Chi for its own most precious qualities. Over recent centuries, the gold mining industry has become more efficient with technological advances. In the old days, prior to modern extraction processes refiners removed what gold they could from the ore that was mined, at least as far as was economically feasible, and cast aside the remaining ore, known as tailings. A blight on the environment, for sure, these tailings were not fully depleted of their gold content. As technological developments made the extraction process more efficient, the cost of refinement dropped accordingly. With new technology the old discarded tailings offered a ready and newly cost effective source of the metal, even though the bulk of the gold had already been extracted. With additional technological advances even these old tailings may yet yield more gold, albeit less and less with each subsequent refinement. In T'ai Chi we can also go back to mine and refine areas in our practice which have already been scoured over. Unlike the gold-laden ore mined from the earth our T'ai Chi tailings become ever more profuse in the riches they yield.

The T'ai Chi Learning Curve

One issue that pretty much escapes the attention of newer students, but which may warrant some attention over any extended study, is that of the learning curve. By this I do not mean wherever it may be that you fall on the T'ai Chi proficiency bell curve. Rather, I am thinking of another curve, one that gauges the breadth of your studies, versus the depth of your studies. This curve reflects how much you know, quantitatively, versus how well you know what you know, qualitatively.

What Might You Be a Champion of?

So what does it mean to be a champion? I began to contemplate this concept when a friend loaned me a DVD on T'ai Chi. This particular T'ai Chi instructional DVD declared on its cover, "The Champion Shows You How." Although the teacher in the video seemed to be skilled and knowledgeable, and had indeed been crowned as a fighting champion at a prestigious Asian competition, I was struck by the hollowness of his claim. Once a champion, always a champion? Yes or no?

Simple Ordinary Learning or Transmission?

There is a very special kind of learning that is often referred to in the literature as occurring in the context of T'ai Chi. This particular sort of learning is not unique to T'ai Chi, but it is rare nonetheless, happening as it does under only under a narrow range of conditions. Furthermore, this particular kind of learning is not unequivocally available to all students. Yet there is no favoritism involved. That's just the way it is. I am referring here to the kind of learning that occurs through transmission of knowledge. Transmission implies knowledge or understanding that has been passed down from one generation to the next. I mean by this knowledge that has been attained and understanding that has been realized in a very special manner as opposed to information that has merely been conveyed in an ordinary manner from one's teacher.

In Summation

In the end, a rewarding teacher/student relationship depends as much on what the student wants and needs from the teacher as it does on what the teacher brings to the table. In order for any relationship to be optimally rewarding both parties must be clear and unambiguous about their roles and their contributions; otherwise, the relationship is dysfunctional and ill fated. Of course, like any other relationship, one that occurs between student and teacher may have its high points and its low points as it evolves over time. This is natural and to be expected. On the whole, though, a healthy relationship must be founded in mutual respect and regard as much as in a desire that the needs of both parties be adequately met. It may well be that you are perfectly okay with a teacher who shows you how to practice T'ai Chi Ch'uan and nothing more—that your teacher be someone who merely guides you through the moves of a T'ai Chi form pattern until such a point as you are able to practice on your own. If there is the added fun of practicing along with others whose company you enjoy, so much the better. Taken to a deeper level, you may prefer a teacher who inspires you—someone who is able to help you see that T'ai Chi can be useful beyond its most superficial expression as a body discipline or as a means of relaxing and reducing the effects of stress. Or, if you are fortunate, and so inclined, your teacher may become someone who touches your soul, and who helps you to grow and experience your T'ai Chi as a living philosophy. In such a case your teacher may become a mentor, a colleague, and even a friend.