

The Quality of Yielding

Explored during a weekend with Napoleon Xifaras

The deeper you dig into the practice of T'ai Chi the more you discover about yourself and your relationship to the world. The softest of all the martial arts T'ai Chi hits the hardest and most profoundly through the quality of yielding. If we can learn to yield then we learn awareness; if we are aware then we can respond to the world as the compassionate warriors we strive to be.

Imagine you turn up at a tai chi class for the first time in your life - with 'beginner's mind'. You face a partner who uses their core body force to push you backwards. Very quickly you realise that using sheer strength to keep your balance is getting you nowhere. So you begin to explore yielding. You discover this through your body, not your mind. In fact the mind itself starts to yield and becomes calm. It's an immediate, wordless learning; how to focus by first making contact with your protagonist, yielding to their touch, absorbing it and then flowing through with creative energy. The contact may be a gentle touch or it may be a punch, a strike or a push but the discovery of the response is always the same: that strength comes from yielding.

We are products of genetic inheritance and social conditioning. We have an inbuilt cognitive bias towards flight or fight. This affects our thinking and harms our perspective. And although we are not living in the Serengeti and in danger of immediate death, we face subtler, more invidious challenges which lead to fear and stress. A fight for our lives in the Serengeti might be a verbal or emotional conflict in today's world. We might react to such a conflict by steaming in with guns blazing on the attack in fight mode; or we might be so fearful of confrontation that we run away or pretend it's not happening: flight mode. If we can learn a more skilful way of responding to conflict through the T'ai Chi then we can apply that learning in our day to day lives. Not reacting with fear or anger but listening, absorbing, yielding so that then we are able to respond with wisdom and compassion.

In meditation the learning becomes deep rooted. If we focus, absorb, yield and flow then we can move from the default position, which leads back and forth from emotional distress to craving and habitual patterns, to a place of fresh intelligence, to ground zero. Then we truly know how to be.

With great thanks to Napoleon Xifaras who made this learning possible on a cold February weekend in Englefield Green. His teaching is a call to action; if you have never tried either T'ai Chi or meditation now is the moment to do so. They have been my lifelines for over thirty years and I shall never stop learning from them.

Sue McAlpine. February 2018