



T'ai chí

European School of T'ai Chi Chuan: Autumn 2007 newsletter

When you pray – move your feet

The old Chinese saying "When you pray – move your feet" appeared at the end of Al Gore's film "An Inconvenient Truth". This phrase summed up the depth of persistence and feeling that keeps Gore and countless others committed to the ecological struggle and ecological education.

"When you pray – move your feet" is also, for me, the mantra that expresses something essential about Tai Chi. So much is written about the benefits and health giving properties of Tai Chi and Chi Kung; about the martial arts roots and the relationship to Chinese medicine. But when you stand (or even sit) quietly holding a pose or move into a very simple gesture, something connects – something happens. A different quality comes through the movement. Perhaps this is close to prayer; or rather, it is moving in a 'prayerful' way. A quite subtle and inexpressible opening seems to occur.

We are on a level where all the discernable benefits of relaxation, flexibility, harmony of mind and body are taking place but also something else happens.

For a number of years I have been doing special-needs Tai Chi sessions at Headway for people who have suffered strokes or head injuries. I often ask myself these questions when I am on my way to teach at Headway:

– "How can an ancient Chinese martial art offer anything to a 21st century

person who has suffered trauma and head injury?"

– "Won't the Chinese terminology of Qi, yin and yang and the meridian system seem strange and archaic to these people who are confronting so many everyday obstacles because of their disabilities?"

At the Headway sessions, I have frequently held back from introducing the Oriental view of the world but when I do talk of these ideas I am often surprised and heartened to hear the response from this group. The response is always witty, intelligent and enthusiastic.

The Headway group really understands what we're trying to connect with. They put into practice: "When you pray – move your one foot, move your arms, shoulders, head or move one side of your body!" They become at one with breath, movement and intention.

I have come to realize that these Tai Chi students are in a special place vis-à-vis the world and its crazy cravings, needs and activity. Being 'stopped in your tracks' can be seen as (and certainly is) a disaster. But the crisis each one of them has been through, and the consequent necessity of changing and simplifying their lives, seems to draw out of each individual an honesty and a tolerant patience with things 'as they are'. I think this puts my friends at Headway into a very receptive place in relation to Tai Chi.

Chinese thinking about life, death, illness, the interdependence of the human being and nature has a simplicity that is very direct and also easily experienced. It is this simplicity of outlook that I believe acts as a means of connection for others, who by necessity are living more simplified lives. "When you pray – move your feet".

Louanne Richards

*"the
prayerful
way"*

Beginner's mind

Tew's retreat took place at Springhead over a perfect October weekend blessed with warm autumn sunshine. As he usually visits in May, Tew was delighted to experience the beauty and tranquillity of the grounds without the rain!

The theme for the weekend was 'Sung and Man', 'sinking and slow'. Tew was keen to impress that while we share the universal mechanics of the form, T'ai Chi is about living and expressing our personal interpretation. In learning the form, we travel through the phases of yin and yang or martial application but to complete the cycle we must go into ourselves.

To truly know T'ai Chi, we should be fully present in every beat, hear the 'middle notes' between each movement and *live* them. As the expression of the form is cyclical, after experiencing each phase, we then begin again.

Welcoming newcomers, Tew was also delighted to see old friends back at Springhead. He feels it's vital that teachers and experienced practitioners regularly come together and return to the 'beginner's mind'. With each new cycle of learning the form, we give ourselves the gift of experiencing each phase more richly, more fully.

Just as we connect with the universality of T'ai Chi, we can connect with universal suffering. Saturday was the

international day of action in support of the monks and people of Burma who have courageously committed to non-violent protest in their fight for human rights and democracy. In solidarity, we created a mandala of petals and autumn leaves by the lake and stood in silent connection.

Later we discussed the nature of anger. T'ai Chi is an interaction with life. It enables us to be sensitive to shifts in energy and act appropriately. While anger is part of being human, there is always a moment when we can decide how it should be best expressed.

Remembering the violence, rape and torture experienced by our brothers and sisters throughout the world, we might question our purpose in the extraordinary calm of Springhead. But our offering is to be well, send out the energy of joy, and celebrate life. That night, in celebration of his 60th birthday, we toasted Tew with his first ever 'beginner's' birthday cake.

Kathrine Smith

*"in
solidarity"*

Holding the circle

It was a full year since I'd been to Springhead. Driving into the darkening red gold sunset, past Stonehenge – a long looping road – time to make the transition from work. Arriving I find my bunk bed, I find my friends. A meal together is the preparation for the retreat ahead – yin before yang.

My impressions – the upside down reflections of the trees in the lake, beds of autumn flowers – dark crimson, purple, deep yellow, hips and haws, Michaelmas daisies, leaves of many colours. Watching the family of swans take flight – moving as one, they swerved several degrees to avoid me as I fished a swan feather out of the lake with a bamboo cane. Preening their wings, snorting occasionally, sunbathing on the small islands of mud.

The open mandala of leaves that was made by everyone – flowers, offerings for the Burmese people – a pattern of love and concern and solidarity that hope in all of us sends across time and distance, hoping for change. There is always hope.

Last September I was in Tibet and witnessed similar oppression and similar resistance – but I also saw the undiminished spirit of the Tibetan people. The old monks who held a puja in the Barkhor with Chinese guards moving around the perimeter – they cast a profound spell with their chanting, their butter lamps and their belief that moved people to tears. We saw the Tibetan women wearing turquoise and coral as they walked and talked in the Tibetan quarter of Lhasa and the wild men from Kham, with scarlet braids wound through their black hair.

In another monastery there was a young monk who kept a scroll picture of the Dalai Lama underneath his robes and showed it to us when he had checked that we were 'safe'. The hotel keeper who sang us Tibetan songs, thanked us for being interested in his country and caring about it. When he said goodbye he raised his hat and underneath he too had a picture of the Dalai Lama.

Religion holds the heart of the Tibetan people. We talked with our guide Buchung, who had been in jail 4 times, and we heard

about some of the terrible things that had happened. They still hold the hope that things will change – I know I was changed by being there. I also know how important it is to move outside my comfort zone – dreaming dreams, hearing stories, journeying.

Moments in the meditation room – feeling completely alive and held in a timeless circle – Wu Chi – candles flickering, soft breathing, the supple stretch of bodies.

I practice T'ai Chi and QiGong on soft grass, in the sunlight – feeling the strength, the fluidity and the power. 'Let the soft animal of your body love what it loves'. My form is different. Allowing that difference – knowing that I come from a different root, by a different route – Gerda Geddes was my root teacher, feeling that difference can be contained in the circle. I learn from others, others learn from me. We are held in the open circle of T'ai Chi and find our way.

The opening and expression of movement into its fullness, sinking, yielding into holding the circle – Wu Chi over and over again. The potential strength and direction of Spear Hand – the opening of the whole body into Magic Bird Slant Flying – Tew said it was his favourite movement – it is one of mine too. Coiling, spiralling and releasing – the deep continuous flow of movement that grows deeper and deeper inside my body and my heart mind.

As the year turns from earth into metal – late summer into autumn, I gather the warmth and experiences of the summer into me. One of my sons returning from Australia, a new granddaughter, a new daughter-in-law, my 93-year-old mother surviving her second heart attack to get to a family party to celebrate a tribal gathering of my own extended family. Travels and teaching to nourish me through the winter months until I can fly again – fullness into emptiness, into the circle of energy, emptiness into fullness.

Tew quoted Antonio Machado – there is no way, no path – we make our way and our path.

Caroline Merry

RETREATS IN 2008

Farnham, Surrey

10th February 10:00 - 4:30pm to include AGM 1:00 - 2:00pm

Springhead, Dorset

16th - 18th May & 3rd - 5th October

Girona, Spain with Juanolo

18th - 20th January; 29th February - 2nd March; 2nd - 4th May & 4th - 6th July

Gascony, France with Louanne and Jos

5th - 11th July

Casa Lucia, Corfu: *The Soaring Crane - Tai Chi Art and Image 2* with Caroline Merry, Val Androutsopoulou, Nathalie Constanti and friends

25th August - 1st September

T'AI CHI CLASSES

Sodge Adams – Hampstead

Jos Hadfield – Farnham

Saskia Handley – Corfu

Georgina MacLaurin –
Isle of Man

Sue McAlpine – Islington

Caroline Merry – Oxford

Jane Muir – Tooting

Valerie Osborne – Corfu

Louanne Richards – Oxford

Chris Sadler – Inverness

Richard Siviak – York

Kamal Thapen – Balham

Tracey Underhill – Sway, New Forest

Sue Webber – Egham

Julia Webster – Farnham