The Layers of Tai Chi Learning and the Rewards of Patience

When I first began my Tai Chi classes I was thrilled to be moving my body in a slow and controlled manner and it was easy to pick up the moves from my career as a dancer and instructor. I thought this was the best way to do Tai Chi and I was eager to learn the 108 moves, so I would “know the set”. But, time marches on and I had a body that was not willing to surrender to relaxation. It was stuck fast in positions and patterns and my back was forever causing me pain, spasms and tightness that ran the length of my spine and through my hips. My feet were always sore, and I never thought the pain in my knees would ever disappear, so that was something I decided was a forever experience. Silly me! Lesson #1 in Tai Chi – Structure. All of us need to learn about the form of Tai Chi and the 5 Principles:

1. Knee behind the toes with the lower leg perpendicular to the ground

2. Square the hips

3. Create a diagonal line with the body from head to toe when it is extended like in a Tor Yu

4. 45 degree angle with the step of the foot

5. Equal and opposite action.

So, began my career as a Tai Chi student. I was desperate to learn the set and reap the rewards. Little did I know about patience. Patience with my body, patience with my mind and patience with my spirit. Who would have thought all of this was possible as a result of doing a few moves a couple of times a week? I pushed my body to do more, stretch further, drop deeper despite the angle of my leg, my mind was commanding my body and was not interested in releasing my thoughts of success no matter the cost. If I was exercising a few times a week, that was meeting the physical activity guide that was recommended, and the results should be forthcoming. Wrong!

As I look back over my 2 and a half decades of dedication to Tai Chi I see the impatient person who did not know how to listen to her body. I recognize the desire for me to control my body. And, as I was directing over my body, I too was directing my mind and my spirit to do what my conscious mind felt was important. Did others share the same observations of their Tai Chi experience? Definitely. We have been led to believe that by routine exercise we will be taking “care” of our body. But, Tai Chi is not exercise! Yes, I repeat, Tai Chi is not exercise! Tai Chi is the knowledge of release. That is, you are in the path of finding out where your resistance is, how it affects you, and what it will require of you to let go of in order to succeed at stress release. As you scratch your head and ponder this thought, imagine what life would be like without stress and without strain. Imagine what life would be like if you listened to your body and you responded to its needs. That is the journey.

You have learnt the set, are you finished learning? No! In fact, you are just getting started. Learning the moves in the set are just finding your baseline. This where you have the knowledge of where the moves will be heading, but you really don’t have a road map to know what the road will be like. This is the second layer of Tai Chi. Where is the resistance?! While you are standing in a Don Yu, you can feel the tension in your lower leg, it happens before you even get a chance to release anything in your hip. However, many of us don’t heed this tension, but desire to drop lower because our neighbours on both sides of us in class can go lower. As a competitive student, this is a deep challenge for me, as I have noticed in many of my students too. And, do you also push through aspects of your life in the same way? Do you finish a chore because it needs to get done, even if you are already tired? Most likely. And, if you knee or ankle or back is feeling a spasm or a tension, do you rub it and carry on? Most likely. Not until you realize these tension moments will your mind change, and your body respond. This is the lesson of patience. I needed a lot to learn this lesson. In fact, I believe it was the better part of two decades to learn this lesson, and sometimes I still have little reminders.

Imagine your life when you release and give. Imagine no tension in what you do or what you move. Imagine that the flow you create becomes a well of strength and energy you never knew existed. Imagine if vitality was as simple as release. This is hard to comprehend. After all, you just signed up for an exercise class, remember?! In fact, you wanted to meet some new friends, go for coffee afterwards, chat on the phone and have a reason for getting out a couple of times a week. But, the gifts of Tai Chi are much deeper than that.

The third level of Tai Chi is sweet. As you become one with the movements, you begin to see that your emotional status each class will determine how the body will be able to release and work into the different Tai Chi movements. This is a big time of reflection and of learning. It is at this time that you begin to see the value of playing with Tai Chi daily. Of finding a routine or a rhythm with the movements that create a shift in thoughts, in motion and in spirit as you release your tension each day and find a free flow in all that you do. This is when Tai Chi and you become one. Now, like all friendships, we have our ups and our downs. I certainly can attest to that. In fact, on two occasions I walked away from Tai Chi and I chose to go back to my old patterns and behaviors. My backache returned, my sore feet were relentless, my voice got weaker, my energy and vitality were non- existent. I knew best, so I plodded through and it showed in all that I was doing. And, then I came back. I walked back into class with a deeper resolve to do better for myself and for those around me. And I did!

The fourth level of Tai Chi increases your knowledge. Attending workshops, finding classes, checking out videos, working on little aspects of a move on your own, reading, finding friends to share Tai Chi with. All of this is important. Then, the opportunity to learn another set comes along. You have been struggling with the memory and the patterns for so long, how could you possibly learn another set? If you don’t, you will resolve to be where you are because the new set will teach you more about your Tai Chi than you could ever imagine. But turning one move in Loh Kup you can change your Tor Yu in Tai Chi. By learning about the movement of the internal organs you begin to free up the tension with the middle of the body that has been holding tight throughout “Move Hands like Clouds”. It is an amazing journey. Then someone passes you a Sabre or a Sword. It looks like fun, but another pattern must be retained. Is it possible? Of course. Because, as soon as you take that first spiraling step, you have a completely new understanding for “White Stork Spreads Wings” and “Repulse Monkey”. It is an incredible journey of understanding. Then, someone introduces you to the seated form. You don’t need to sit, so you resist because you don’t have an impediment. Until you take the time to isolate the hips on the chair and begin to feel the internal mechanics of the spine, you have never really understood the full workings of a spine rotation or of a push through the foot that works the internal organs. It is not until you surrender your ego that you can begin to learn these lessons. The rewards are the sweetest ever.

Now you approach the fifth level of Tai Chi. The true meaning of the moves is surrounded by folklore, animal essence, the power of names and the order of the moves. This level of learning is all about understanding the choice to receive health and the need to release the imbalance of yin and yang that results from the challenges in our world. This is an awareness of the flow of electricity that is our power source within the body. The opening of the gates from Lower Dan Tien to Upper Dan Tien. The drop in the hip to release the knees and to find an ease of movement that is no effort in something that looks very difficult to the audience watching. This awakening is when the richness of Tai Chi creates a longing within the body for more self-care, more happiness within the tissue, and a feeling of bliss with the free flow that results from all that is possible with Tai Chi. It is a journey, a very worthwhile journey. As you look at what lies ahead of you and your Tai Chi. Consider the classes you can get to, consider the workshops that are possible for you, consider the videos that are available to you and consider the amazing friendships that will support you on your journey with Tai Chi. Welcome to the club.

Michelle Greenwell is a Tai Chi enthusiast who embraces the form of Master Moy Lin Shin. She has spent the last decade embracing the intentions of the names in the Tai Chi sets, as well as the meaning that it has for our lives going forward. She enjoys sharing this knowledge with others and helping them find a way to reap the benefits of health, energy and vitality as a result of their journey with Tai Chi. You can find Michelle at [www.dancedebut.com](http://www.dancedebut.com), on Facebook: Tai Chi Cape Breton, The KEY to Health with Energy Medicine, Qi YINtegration, One Step to Change Direction, Intend2RaeD8 and Dance Debut. She also has her own Youtube channel: Michelle Greenwell. Offering classes in Cape Breton and across the country, she has videos available for purchase and retreats available.