

## Understanding and Achieving Different Levels of Skill

I was talking to one of our Wu Dao Gong instructors about how wonderful the movements of my teacher, Fei Wang were when he demonstrated to us : his posture straight but not tense, his waist turning to the point where his body was almost side on and yet it still looked natural, his arms held in difficult positions but so relaxed. He was sitting low on his legs which showed a strong, curved structure indicating strength and springiness and his overall energy radiated power and ease. It was similar to seeing the inspiring works of Leonardo Da Vinci or Michelangelo's statue of David. A true work of art! However, my instructor said the problem is that not everyone can see it. This is unfortunately true and is also true of most artistic works.



**You usually have to know something about the subject matter to truly appreciate it.** It is like listening to pop music and then trying to understand opera. It needs to be understood in a certain cultural context to be fully appreciated. When students ask about practising Tai Chi correctly, I tell them it is necessary to know the fundamental principles of the art first before you can grasp its higher levels.

When we first start learning Tai Chi, not much of it makes sense. It seems weird; slow movements, strange postures and esoteric philosophy. **It is certainly not your usual exercise. It takes time for the practice to make sense.** Some students who have studied other martial arts can see elements of what they have done previously. However, it is still a mystery to them, especially when it comes to considering Tai Chi as a real martial art. These misconceptions are not only common in the west but even in China, its birthplace. **Most**

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Our annual **Tai Chi & Mediation Retreat** at SIBA, East Gippsland, will be from 5pm Saturday 14 April to 1pm Wednesday 18 April 2018.

**people do not fully appreciate the depth and power of Tai Chi.** This is partly due to the lack of good masters today. Even in the past, many great masters were quite reclusive and would only pass their knowledge on to highly motivated students.

Another reason is that Tai Chi is an internal art. How then is it different from other arts or sports? **Internal is a way of describing the subtle changes the body undergoes as you become more competent with the movements and the methods of training.** At first, you just copy the movements and follow the teacher in a mechanical way. This is similar to taking a photo of say, a tree or a building. In the photo, only the image is captured. Many aspects are missing, such as the details in terms of construction, growth, the feel and smells, etc. **Once you have memorised and copied the movements, you then need to work on the details,** such as coordinating different parts of the body, positioning of the joints and so on. It is only after you have learnt the form, and become stronger and more relaxed, that you will be able to develop the internal aspects of the practice.



Once you can go through the form on your own, the next step is to understand why the

movements are so designed. This process involves learning about the applications and body mechanics of the movements. This is an important stage of learning. Some students might think that they don't want to learn about the martial side of the art; all they want is the relaxation part. This is fine. However, the more you understand the form, the more benefits you will receive. **The applications are a way of clarifying your movements and developing another dimension to your practice.** The form is no longer then just a bunch of random movements. It is now a meaningful, structured series.



Once we understand the meaning and applications of the movements, the next stage is **to develop the ability to flow through the whole form, linking each posture so it resembles a flowing stream.** According to the Tai Chi classics, when one part of the body moves, every part of the body moves. In order to achieve this, the body has to move as a unified structure. Each part needs to be connected and strong. This stage is built on greater leg strength and overall flexibility. A good level of relaxation is only possible when the legs can comfortably carry the upper body from one position to another.

To reach the higher stages of the art, **Push Hands** should be learnt. It is a two person training exercise which develops sensitivity and strength and further refines coordination. **Fa jin** (release of explosive power) needs to be practised to help you feel and understand internal coordination. Once you have reached these stages, your form will feel and look very different. Now your body will listen to your commands. You can feel more. You can adjust and move every part of your body. At this point in your training, your relaxation reaches deeper states and your power is effortless. Now, your external movements have a strong effect on the internal, such as breathing and other bodily functions. When you practise your form, the postures seem to generate the rhythm of the breath and



blood flows more strongly. The mind enters a state of tranquillity where the outside world hardly impacts upon your performance. **The more internal our practice becomes, the more joy and well being we experience.** Our spirit is brighter. We stand, walk and sit straighter. We move in a relaxed flowing way. We radiate strength and relaxation naturally. Our confidence is centred and at ease.



**Students who have been practising regularly for a period of time are much stronger and more vibrant. You can see it in their complexion. They look bright, vital and spirited.** The Chinese call this jing shen. Students who are practising the Wu Dao Gong internal martial arts are encouraged to work much harder than Tai Chi students. They really start to exhibit all the above qualities. The Wu Dao Gong system shares many of the Tai Chi principles. However, it goes deeper in some areas and builds stamina and strength faster. Those students who follow the qigong courses Fontane teaches also develop the qualities of jing shen in their state of well being.



When you touch hands with a master of the internal arts, you may not be able to keep your balance. From the outside, it looks as if he is not doing nothing. However, each part of his body can move. It is this unified force that is so hard to detect and yet almost impossible to stop. To the onlooker, it appears to be magic or prearranged. However, to those who know, it is a sign of high level internal skill. In Chinese, it is called nei gong (internal work).

I hope this article sheds some light on the internal aspects of Tai Chi and Wu Dao Gong and inspires you to go deeper in your practice. May you discover the internal for yourself!

– **Chief Instructor Brett Wagland**