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Hi Chris! You recently launched an online platform called The Tai Chi Academy. What made you start this new project ?

My old students bugging me to do so! Haha. In fact the story is a little longer than this.

I have been involved in the Internal Arts since around 1998 and they have always been a core component of my daily practice. I focused my studies on the arts of Xing yi and Taiji but also enjoyed studying Ba Gua. In around 2007, I opened a small training school in Gloucestershire UK which became frequented by a number of long term Tai chi students under famous masters. These individuals had vastly more years of training than me, up to 35 years, but didn't have any of the details that I was taught or discovered through training. It was extremely surprising and this was a situation that I encountered time and again when meeting new instructors or practitioners.

My school was focused on the martial side of Tai chi and xing yi and the body methods that were required to make the martial art effective. At the time, I was a bouncer in a very rough nightclub and had many opportunities to test the effectiveness of the art. Through this lens, my understanding of the importance of effective training methods came to the fore.

In this way, I believe that there is a fundamental lack of detail in many Tai chi schools practice and teachings. Much of the time this is fine, if we just are aiming to enjoy the practice. But if we want to use tai chi for real health benefit or for fighting, we must focus our energy on specific attributes and how they are built, this takes detailed focus.

After testing my ideas regarding Tai Chi and the body methods inherent in it, and at the behest of many students I have had contact with, I decided to release the details that made my interpretation of this art effective. And so the Tai Chi academy was born.

Learning martial arts online can be tough ! What is your approach when teaching tai chi online ? How far do you think a student can go without meeting a teacher in real life ?

Well, I believe we have to separate a few things here in order to answer the question. Tai Chi is many things to many people! But let's look at some core components.

Firstly we have the methods of body and mind development, the development of the Tai Chi body. *This can absolutely be taught online* and shouldn't be viewed as different to learning any other skill through virtual means. With the right instruction anyone can both intellectually and physically understand the methods of development in Tai chi and develop the way in which we are expected to move. The big stumbling block for most people here is motivation and persistence. Many people would rather move the responsibility for their development onto a teacher ... rather than their own shoulders! This process alone can take many years.

Secondly we have the way in which this Tai chi Body interacts with external forces. Here we need a partner but again, we can get 75% of the understanding we need through online means. There is, however, at this point some requirement for a teacher to feel what you are doing and this will, of course, be absent in online-only instruction.

Thirdly, we have the combative application. This is a deeply misunderstood thing in the Tai chi world in my opinion. We see contrived applications of form movements that would never work, even against an untrained fighter, abound, and if one wants to learn these, then yes they could also be taught online.

If, however, one wants to be able to defend oneself and/or learn to actually fight. Then no, it cannot be taught purely online.

We need to have access to training partners and a coach of some sort in order to arrange training, control sparring and correct errors. With that said, what can be taught are the instructions and concepts that someone interested in fighting should be aiming to replicate. This material is most relevant to someone already training somewhere or with regular access to training partners.

So in summary, for the training provided in the Tai Chi Academy, it can absolutely be taught online, provided we maintain the right focus, context and self-determination to learn.

There are two types of people for whom the academy is aimed. 1) the person without access to a good instructor and 2) the person with access to a teacher, but seeking more information or a different perspective.

Do you have recommendations for students learning online? How can they evaluate their own practice, make sure there is no mistake or misunderstanding?

I think they should be willing to make mistakes! Mistakes are the inevitable part of personal training, development and research. We should embrace the idea of discovery and struggle in our training, make mistakes and learn to identify them and correct them through more rigorous study.

When I would learn from my teacher, he would give me something to work on for a month ... there was no class every day, no access to him for questions. I would train, struggle and make mistakes. Then I would go back to teacher and he would make a little correction here or there.

For the online student, the lessons are the teacher. In the Tai Chi Academy there are 370+ lessons on every topic. These are not lessons for intellectual fun, they are lessons to give answers to what students will find in their own training! It is a constant cycle – The training gives rise to the questions > the questions give motivation to seek the answers > the answer inform the training, the training gives rise to new questions ...

Provided you have access to the information, you simply keep having to refer to it as soon as you start to struggle. Then pay close attention, and go back to training. Good information will not stop mistakes, but it will stop misunderstanding, and that is the true beauty of online training No travelling to see teacher!

Let's talk a little bit about tai chi. There are many styles out there, many teachers and masters. How to find the one that is right for you? For some people, the martial side is critical, whereas for others, they are only looking at the health aspect, or even the spiritual side of tai chi.

Only the individual can answer that question, and only through trial and error. I have met a large number of Martial artists from every discipline that you can imagine. From Silat to Systema, from Tai Chi to Jiu Jitsu. I can say with certainty that the true masters were all pretty much the same, it didn't really matter what style it was.

The one thing that people should be looking for and focusing on is the quality of the teacher as a teacher, of the information and of the students.

One of the biggest mistakes I see in the selection of an instructor or teacher is the focus on what they can do, who they trained with and what their lineage chart looks like! There is an assumption that the teacher must be the best person in the room! But we don't think this way about any other practice, Cus D'mato wouldn't have been able to beat Tyson and I have no idea who taught him! What we should be focused on is how good the teacher is, as a teacher! This is by far the most important aspect.

You will know quickly if someone is a good teacher. Even the novice has good instincts for this skill. If they are, then stick around and see if the class is for you. If they aren't ... walk out the door.

One big topic about tai chi is that it's an "internal art". It's often said that its internal mechanics are different from other internal arts like baguazhang, xing yi quan... or even chen style. How do you approach the specific mechanics of tai chi in your training ?

The style of Tai Chi, or internal art, is somewhat irrelevant to a degree. Yes, the mechanics may be different, certainly the tactics are different, and most definitely the forces are different. But these are just facets of the way in which the mind gives rise to the form of the body.

We use the body, mind and intent to create specific conditions, then apply a deep introspection to understand, feel and develop those conditions. These things are the commonality of internal power between the various systems.

The development of the body involves the creation of the connected, agile, heavy, stable and free body. The body which has balance of yin and yang, open and close, rise and fall. The body that is threaded together and connected.

The development of the intent is the development of the 'wiring' system throughout the body, so that the gap between the minds will enact something, either conscious or unconscious is uninhibited. Then we have the mind ... which is another story entirely!

The tai chi chuan is deeply rooted in Chinese and Taoist culture. As westerners, do you think there is a challenge there ? Can the tai chi chuan practiced in the west be considered as authentic or true to its origins ?

An interesting question, there are two schools of thought here.

- 1) that Tai Chi is inherently the product of Chinese and Taoist culture and always must be framed within that context for authenticity.
- 2) That Tai Chi does not exist outside of the individual practicing it and therefore it is the practice that matters most! (how very Taoist!)

I subscribe to the latter, not to diminish the importance of heritage but because, simply put, heritage does not impact the actual training and it is the training that gives rise to Tai Chi. Much like we do not need to understand Russian Culture to use Kettle Bells. I do not believe that that we must understand Taoism to use Tai Chi. It works regardless.

Now of course, the study of culture and history are fascinating parts of a practice and tradition! But I certainly do not envy the lineage inheritors who are charged with upholding the traditions! These people are few and far between, maybe one or two individuals, and the burden they carry is heavy.

Without this burden we can focus on actually practicing ... and everything comes back to that. Does understanding origin, or some concept of 'authenticity' aid you in a 1 hour training session or when facing an opponent? No, it does not.

One of my masters often said that the key to learning tai chi is "more practice" but it can be challenging to know what is important to improve. How do you think a student can evaluate what are the key elements he needs to focus on in his training?

A great question and unfortunately my answer is ... more practice! Practice provides the problems that we should then research and resolve. We can start with a broad area of training, the students will definitely find something that they struggle with. Then the questions and answers begin and where we put our focus becomes clear.

An important part here is to take notes, assess yourself with your peers, test your abilities and be brutally honest. Then get good questions from training, get good answers from instruction, and begin to become resolved.

Thank you for all these precious answers! Is there anything else you would like to add ?

I would just like to thank you for taking the time to reach out to me and give me the opportunity to share my thoughts on your excellent blog. It is a rarity for martial artists, especially those in the more traditional spheres to reach out and enquire into the opinions of others. I hope that mine prove to be an interesting read if nothing else.

Happy training all.