

COMFORT ISN'T ALL IT'S CRACKED UP TO BE

By Laoshi Laurince McElroy

Originally published December 2017

You know the feeling: you can't wait to get home, slip into something comfortable, sit on your comfy sofa or in favorite chair, put your feet up, and tune into your favorite viewing habit. Comfort is good, right?

Not always.

Change seldom — if ever — happens in comfort.

Part of the Water Tiger vernacular includes the Chinese adage — hijacked by Chinese Martial Arts: *chi ku* or “eat bitter”. It is often used as a verb meaning “to endure hardships”. Hopefully, it is clear that its use is to prepare us to be willing to “eat bitter” so we can, eventually, taste the sweet.

One of the two main images that I use to illustrate this point is that of an oyster's forming of a pearl. In a nutshell:

Natural Pearls form when an irritant — usually a parasite and not the proverbial grain of sand — works its way into an oyster, mussel, or clam. As a defense mechanism, a fluid is used to coat the irritant. Layer upon layer of this coating, called *nacre*, is deposited until a lustrous pearl is formed. (pearls.com)

In discomfort — in tasting bitter — beauty is actualized.

My other “go-to” image for illustrating the concept of *chi ku* is that of the making of a fine sword:

A forged blade is created by heating the metal and pounding it into shape. Forged swords may contain a single metal or a combination of metals. (science.howstuffworks.com)

Discomfort takes many forms.

Part of my usual introductory speech for public classes is a nod to the fact that many people come to T'ai Chi and Qigong because they've read or heard that they're good for a particular condition, e.g., lower back pain, fibromyalgia, arthritis, etc. Yet, at the first sign of discomfort, they quit coming to class. I always tell people that they have to be the arbiter of their own bodies, but that they need to recognize that when they first start to move to address such issues, the volume on those issues is going to be turned up. Discomfort from moving things we're not accustomed to moving is much different than the pain behind causing or deepening an injury. If we can find a pathway through



Change seldom — if ever — happens in comfort.

the discomfort — *chi ku* — we will be rewarded.

I broke my back in 1985. I stepped into the room for my first T'ai Chi class a few years later. It wasn't because of my back, but I knew it might help. Those initial months of moving in ways that were unfamiliar and moving things that I hadn't moved in fear of triggering a muscle spasm that could lay me up for days or weeks, were tough. My daily pain and discomfort increased. However, I was careful not to push to injury and I worked through freeing myself from the stagnation in the joints and muscles that had developed over nearly four years of purposeful neglect. Had I allowed my discomfort to drive me away from Black Dragon School, not only would those occasional spasms still be happening on a regular — if not more frequent basis — but, there would also not be a Water Tiger School.

Discomfort can also arise when we have to find time to play beyond that time we take in class. We're busier now, as a people, than we probably have been through all of human history. And, as noted at the head of this essay, the sofa is an alluring siren. Make the time — *chi ku*. Don't be like the public class students who were late on a weekly basis because their "program" wasn't over on television until the scheduled beginning of class.

We don't like to fail, but learning the arts we play is nothing but an ongoing and never-ending process of failure on the way to success. Unfortunately, the more we reach for perfection, the harder things become. I love failing; it points the way. You, too, should learn to accept and love failing — *chi ku*. As the Japanese proverb tells us: "Fall seven times, stand up eight."

Being called on our failures can also serve to make us uncomfortable. My days in the theatre gave me my favorite quote about critics, it's from Ronald Harwood's *The Dresser*:

Hate the critics? I have nothing but compassion for them. How can one hate the crippled, the mentally deficient, and the dead?

Hopefully, you never think of me, a senior student, or whoever may be instructing you in whatever you are doing as being crippled, mentally deficient, or dead. I believe that most instructors do everything they can to direct their charges to make a correction on their own. Although the bamboo staff on the back of the head has gone the way of Pei Mei and Saturday afternoon "Kung Fu Cinema", sometimes a press has to be abandoned for a push. As one of my favorite musicians, Frank Turner, tells us: "We could get better; Because we're not dead yet." Accepting the "bad" notes as you would the "good" is not only the pathway to getting better, it's also yet another way to *chi ku*.

Comfort is good for a cold Saturday night cuddling with someone you love, but probably it is not the pathway to success in most other endeavors.

