

THE EGO IS A LIAR

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Whenever I contemplate things dealing with ego, I can't help but think of a column of David Gerrold's in his *State of the Art* series for *Starlog Magazine*. If you're a fan of the original *Star Trek* series, you might remember that Mr. Gerrold penned *The Trouble with Tribbles*. The particular installment that comes to mind was published in June 1978 (Number 14). In a nutshell, it addresses the virtue of having an ego. Mr. Gerrold's point-of-view can be condensed into one short phrase from the column: "... nobody ever got rich and successful by doubting that he could do something ..."

The grounded sense of confidence that we all must have to take the next step is not what I mean to address here as I write about ego. What I want to explore are the dangers of having an inflated view of yourself and your abilities. It is in this context that I believe the ego is a liar. Although there are probably 10,000 different ways the inflated ego can lie to you, I will tackle only a handful.

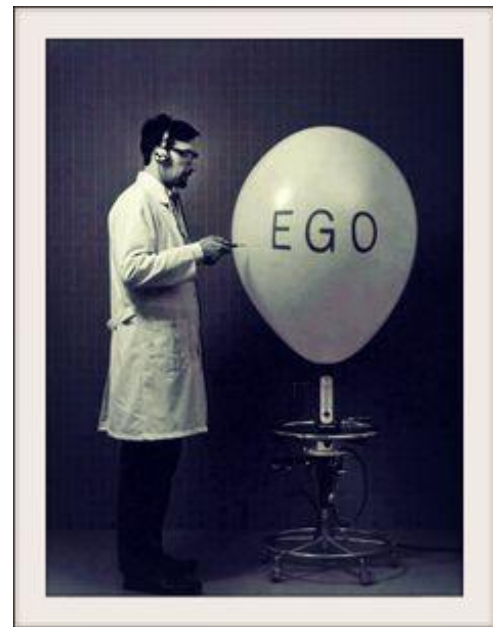
Physical Training and Stretching

In 2010, I began using the Beachbody training programs of Tony Horton, starting with *P90X*. I have to confess that more than once over the past six years I've allowed my ego to get the best of me and it has sometimes led to an injury. The little voice in my head would say things like "you can hold that balance *asana* just a little longer" and "just one more rep to get to 10". At these times, I guarantee my body was telling me that I needed to put a foot or the weight down; but, my mind got in the way.

This is actually somewhere that our training in T'ai Chi can come in handy. As Stefan Trilling writes in *Tai Chi Chuan and the Eyes* (*Tai Chi*, Vol 39 No 2, 36): "... Tai Chi practitioners concern themselves with simultaneously increasing the body's natural intelligence and releasing the mind's aggressive leadership over the body."

I've learned the importance of applying my T'ai Chi principles in my resistance training and Yoga practice. After 27 years, I'm still learning how broad our art can apply.

That little voice can be the danger when we stretch as well. Most injuries on the mat at Water Tiger do not occur in the floor exercises and form play; they happen during personal or class warm-ups.



What I want to explore are the dangers of having an inflated view of yourself and your abilities.

Perhaps the voice is telling you that you don't need to get the muscles warm before you stretch: "It's OK, you can stretch cold." No, it is not. A warm muscle is a happy muscle. A warm muscle is a more pliable muscle.

Perhaps the voice is telling you that reaching the floor or deepening your arc is what's important; so, you muscle deeper into the stretch. Your muscles are so tight while you're forcing your fingers ever so closer to the floor or your arc is ever so closer to matching your classmate's that there's nothing you can do when they give, pull, tear. It's too late.

You should use your muscles only to support your stretch, not to manifest your stretch.

If you haven't heard my favorite Master Pan Quingfu story, here's a condensed version:

A body builder when young, Pan quit taking care of himself as he aged. Older and falling out of health, he was advised to study martial arts. He walked into a kwoon and saw young men stretching. He used his strength to match their stretch, heard a pop, and woke up in hospital realizing doing so probably wasn't a good idea.

Floor Exercises and Form Play

Aside from the, hopefully, obvious fact we shouldn't move in a deeper stance just because our legs might be able to handle it, we also shouldn't force our bodies to manifest positions and movements just because "that's the way you do it".

I often say on the mat and in the room that the first three most important words in T'ai Chi are: 1) practice; 2) practice; and 3) practice. I then add that the next three important words are: 1) modify; 2) modify; and 3) modify.

Many students resist the use of a training wheel in their play, e.g., a different weight shift, a different step, keeping a foot down, keeping a kick lower, etc. They shouldn't. One of our art's greatest attributes is its ability to be modified without diminishing its principles. A modification is not cheating or failure; it's a pathway to success in the art.

Self Defense

In *The Book of the Five Rings*, Miyamoto Musashi writes: "You can only fight the way you practice." If your training does not regularly include realistic fight scenarios, with impact, you can never say: "I got this."

So, while I agree that having confidence is important in all aspects of our physical training and our journey with T'ai Chi, I also believe that the ego is a liar. The ego will trick you into injury, clunky play of your art, and dangerous situations on the street.

