

## Exploring the Metaphor: T'ai Chi & Driving

*How understanding what it means to drive can help us to understand our T'ai Chi practice.*

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As the study and practice of T'ai Chi can be something entirely new, we look to the familiar to help us understand. Most of us, over the age of 16, can easily relate to things having to do with our experience behind the wheel or under the hood. Cars and driving then become a powerful tool to help us better understand this art we practice. I would like to thank Rick Riordan for first introducing me to this tool in his article "A Discussion of Qi and How It Can Be Used" (*T'ai Chi*, August 1993, 8-12). His interview with James Sun opened the door to the many driving metaphors applicable to our practice and study.

The movements of the form can seem very foreign to us. We stumble through transitions and postures with our minds seemingly having to be focused on every increment of every movement. Many find this frustrating and we want our form to flow and our movement to be without thought. To understand the virtue of patience, think of your first time behind the wheel of a car. Every movement had thought behind it, as your hands were tense in gripping the steering wheel, the gearshift, and even the turn signal lever.

I often tell students the story of my first driving lesson behind the wheel: Coming to a T-intersection on a gravel road near my home in rural Iowa, I looked at the speedometer to determine the speed at which I could take the corner. Thinking to myself that 45 miles per hour was reasonable, I was lucky that my father had quick reactions and a long leg with which to hit the brake!

As the years progress behind the wheel, we no longer have to think of what we do behind the wheel. Our grip is loosened on the steering wheel as we operate the gearshift, the turning signals, and all the other functions of driving without the need for conscious thought. We know that it is the feel of the vehicle that determines speed around a corner and not a look at the dashboard gauges. With time, patience, and practice, the same is possible with T'ai Chi.

This image can even be expanded to the practice of T'ai Chi weaponry. One of the goals we seek when we add weapon training to our art is to "become one with the weapon." This isn't esoteric thought at its zenith. As you become one with your vehicle when you drive, you want to be one with the weapon. The sword, staff, fan, cane, spear, or other weapon is not separate from our hand, our arm, our body, our mind. Just as we feel the road through the wheels on the pavement and turn the steering wheel as if it were a part of us, so the weapon is as much a part of us as it moves through the air in front, beside, and behind us.

The image of driving can also be a simple way for us to connect with the importance of relaxation in practice, in combat, and in life. The heavy and temperamental traffic in which we so often find ourselves on Long Island, or in other similar areas where "rush hour" has little to do with rushing and is more than an hour, may force us to drive with one foot on the accelerator and one foot on the brake. We really shouldn't drive this way. We do not get anywhere very quickly nor do we reap the rewards of higher gas mileage. If we move with tension, we are moving with one foot on the accelerator and one foot on the brake. Not only do we slow down our reaction time, but we also wear ourselves out more quickly. Mental tension is the same. We must learn to relax the body and relax the mind so that both can operate quickly and efficiently with no need to relax and calm as a first step to taking action. With the foot off the brake, all we have to do is accelerate to get us to where we need to be in our practice, in facing conflict, and in living our life.



We must learn to take our foot off the brake so that we can practice better, faster, & more efficiently.

Finally, we may turn to the car to help us understand how Mind, Body, and Qi come together. The Qi is the fuel that is guided to the engine of the Body and then manifested in Jing (explosive energy). The Mind is the driver who presses the accelerator determining the power and the direction needed to complete the given task. To take the image one step further, it is the Spirit of the driver that determines how the Mind will guide the Qi and manifest the Jing. Beware the aggressive driver, his Spirit, Mind, and Body are not balanced and his Qi is not smooth.

The complexity of T'ai Chi Ch'uan can become overwhelming at times. If it does, step back, breathe, and relate your study to other aspects of your life. It is usually by looking at the simple that we truly begin to understand the complex.

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Credits:

Rick Riordan, "A Discussion of Qi and How It Can Be Used," *T'ai Chi* (August 1993, 8-12).

