

KEEPING WHAT WORKS

By Laoshi Laurince McElroy

If you've been on the mat for any length of time, you've probably heard or seen a reference to *The Five Mental Keys to Diligent Study*. They are a simple guide from the *Tai Chi Classics* that can aid the individual as they shape their own journey with the study of the art of T'ai Chi Ch'uan. In case you don't know them — or don't remember them — here they are again, with some short discussion notes from me in italics:

1. Study wide and deep.
The broader your foundation, the stronger your art.
2. Investigate, ask.
Seek to understand all things in fullness.
3. Ponder carefully.
Discover the proper meaning for yourself.
4. Clearly discriminate.
Use what works; disregard what remains.
5. Work perseveringly.
Be always the student.

Although it is considered a given at Water Tiger School that the three most important words in T'ai Chi are: *practice, practice, practice*; the student of the art must come to recognize practice alone is not enough to cultivate an understanding of all that art is and all that the art has to offer. Research is as necessary to our training as is meditation and Qigong. With this in mind, I'm going to address myself to the first point.

Just as there are those that argue they don't want to practice until they get it right, there are those that argue they don't want to confuse themselves with too much information or with points-of-view that might differ from those presented on the mat of Water Tiger. I always tell the former that if they wait to practice until they get it right, they will never get it right; and I always tell the latter that additional information and various points-of-view can help support our journey.

When we walk a narrow path instead of a wide path, there is always a greater chance there will be a misstep. If we expose ourselves to as much information from as many sources as possible, we expand our experience and challenge what it is we think we know.

As part of my usual presentations to public classes, I speak to the fact that there are many different approaches to the playing and teaching of T'ai Chi. This is exemplified every year during the *Facilitators' Demonstration* at our annual *World Tai Chi & Qigong Day* events. Given the breadth of my experience, i.e., the fact that I continually expose myself to the views of others through what I read, watch, and experience, I'm able to cite actual examples of such differences and speak to both my understanding of why someone might move or breathe differently than the Water Tiger lineage teaches and why I believe our choice works to better match our view of a given principle of the arts.

I can hear it now, "Well, you've done it, so I don't have to."

There is a quote that is usually attributed to Confucius: "Tell them and they'll forget; show them and they'll remember; involve them and they'll understand." Sure, I can tell you what I know — about what I have experienced. But to truly make the art your own, you are the one that must have the experience. You must involve yourself in your own learning to truly understand the breadth and depth of this art we play.



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Without your own commitment to research, you will only have the tip of the iceberg from the perspective of me. I like to think that's a pretty good perspective to have, but it is truly only one of uncountable others.

Aside from strengthening your own perspective, exposing yourself to broader sources can also serve to open the door to learning. You never know what kernel of information might be the trigger to deeper understanding.

I often cite receiving a video from Howard Choy, Chief Instructor and Principal of the Sydney Tai Chi and Qigong Centre in Australia. Years ago, Mr. Choy sent his customized shortening of the traditional *Long Form* for my feedback. In watching the video, there was more than one time that I saw something that made me rethink my own understanding of various movements and transitions in the *Long Form*. Admittedly, I might not have the best opinion of some of the videos I've watched or articles and books I have read, but there has not been a single one that have made me say anything along the line of "That's lost time I'll never get back."

If you say "no" to expanding your experience, you limit your possibilities. While Water Tiger always seeks to cultivate the potential that already exists in each of our students, the responsibility also falls on the individual. Without broader horizons, the cultivation cannot be complete. It is not unlike planting a garden where the plants will not get the sunlight and water they need.

The other thing a successful garden requires is careful weeding. This is reflected in the fourth of *The Five Mental Keys to Diligent Study*. The wider and deeper your study, the more intensely you must clearly discriminate. It is a principle of Taoism to keep what works and disregard the rest. This doesn't mean, however, you can toss something aside simply because you don't like it.

This would be yet another example of why the Chinese refer to what we do as "playing" T'ai Chi. When you stumble upon something new, you have to play with it for a bit. Only after you have spent some time throwing it up in the air and catching it, batting it around, chewing on it, etc., can you truly and honestly determine if it's something that belongs in your toy box or not.

To get all you can out of your journey, you must be willing to explore with depth and breadth, play with abandon, and carry with you only that which serves your continuing growth to meet your ever-expanding potential.

