

MAKING: A MISTAKE

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When I started teaching and I decided I would make storytelling a part of what I presented, *The Monkey, the Urn, and the Disciple* was one of the first stories I chose. If you know *Water Tiger*, you — more than likely — know it. I do reference it quite often and it is not only still handed out in nearly all of my introductory public classes, it is also in the second group of handouts I give to all new students in the studio.

As a number of parables I have told over the 26 years I have been at the front of the room, this story is an adaptation of a scene from the original *Kung Fu* television series. The moral of the story is given by the master of the temple (Master Kan in the series) at its close: “ ... remember through your life to let go of those things that do not serve you, but force you to serve them.”

It is an important lesson. We hold onto things.

We shouldn't. How strongly do I feel about this? Look at the underside of my right wrist — the words “let go” are inked there.

One of those things upon which we can maintain a tight grip as we are on our journey with the art of T'ai Chi Ch'uan is *making*. We should let it go of the belief, the illusion, that we have to **make** things happen. It doesn't work and it actually goes against the principles of the art. You might think of how heavily the image of water courses through our practice. Water does nothing to take the shape of whatever container into which we pour it. Water doesn't make itself flow around the rock in the stream. Water doesn't force itself into the crack in the sidewalk, wall, dam, etc. We should follow its lead.

One of the first times on the mat or in the room that *making* can rear its ugly head is the first introduction to *Water Tiger's* vertical alignment principles. Instead of the simple slight drop of the chin, people will lift the crown point of their head. This creates tension in the neck and head that reverberates down into the shoulders and upper back. It makes us top heavy and it makes us work too hard to keep our balance. The principle that “the spine should hang like a string of pearls” is that the *Baihui* is held to the heavens and the *Huiyin* is anchored toward the earth. People tend to want to lift the *Baihui* up and lock the *Huiyin* to the ground. Making such happen tenses the spine; it creates a stiffening of the spine not a hanging of it. If we simplify the activation of the two points, vertical alignment takes care of itself. If we insist on making vertical alignment happen, we will also be solely responsible for maintaining our structure and balance. Is it not easier to allow than to make?

I cannot tell you how many times I have adjusted someone's play of a particular moment and the response I hear goes something like this: “Wow! You just made that easier.”

We tend to work to move things the way we think they should be moved instead of allowing ourselves to find the path of least resistance — like water. Oddly, sometimes that



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path means more expanded movement and sometimes that path means more compressed movement. When our consciousness guides us, the brain will choose the hardest way each time — especially if you tend to think of practice as *work*. The brain will expand the body when we should compress it and compress the body when we should expand it. Perhaps you have heard what has become one of my favorite phrases over the past 18 months or so (I'm sorry that I don't have the source): "Let go of the aggressive control of the mind and trust the natural intelligence of the body."

The language here is important. The phrase does not suggest *forcing* or *making* the aggressive control of the mind release; it clearly states we should "let go" of it. This reminds me of the number of times I have heard something like this on the mat and in the room: "I have to learn how to **make** myself relax more" [my emphasis added]. Nope. There's no muscle to flex. No nail to hammer into place. Just allow yourself to relax. That is all.

Consider this cutting from a handout that was initially shared well over a decade ago; it's from an associate of Dr. Paul Lam, Carol Tennesen:

One day, Jay brought a banana to class. "Here," he said, as he handed the banana to me. "Hold this in your hand and don't let it drop."

He told me to relax my hand but to keep holding the banana. I tried several times, but as hard as I tried, I simply couldn't do it. If I managed to hang on to the banana, Jay said my hand was not relaxed enough. So I would relax my hand even more, but then I'd drop the banana. Finally Jay reached out and very gently turned my hand over; and lo, the banana now rested in my totally relaxed open palm. The lesson? Sometimes, Jay said, when you try too hard to relax, you drop the banana. Better to change your point of view (or turn your hand over). Sometimes, Jay said, you have to change your relationship to your tai chi, if your goal is to seek balance but not hold on to it. Think of the banana and what happens when you let go of effort.☺

The paradox of the art we play is that the greatest challenge it presents us is its simplicity. Yes, there are complex theories under all we do — think of the 13 root energies that are in each and every part of the body during each and every movement. We can't make them manifest; however, if we have proper intent and structure, they're there. See? Easy. The same is true with originating our movement from the *Shiah Dan Tier*: if the intent is there, that is from where the movement will come. Unfortunately, sometimes something else I hear from time to time is this: "My movement's finally relaxed and flowing; now I just have to make it come from my center."

What we come to discover through our play is that our greatest opponent will always be the one who stares back at us from the mirror. But we also come to recognize that to triumph all we have to do is let go of the apple in the urn.



☺ *Dr Lam's Tai Chi, Health & Lifestyle Newsletter*, Issue #36, July 2004. Received via email, nd.