

It's Not the Mat

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The first chapter of *Tao Teh Ching* begins, depending on translation, something like this: "Tao can be talked about, but not the Eternal Tao. Names can be named, but not the Eternal Name." I propose that the same thing applies to the path that leads us to understanding the art of T'ai Chi Ch'uan.

We can talk about the art until we are blue in the face, but that is not how we will come to comprehend all that it is and all that it offers. We can study the classics, the words on the page or screen, until our brains can absorb not one syllable more, but that is not how we will come to own the movements, understand them, and retain the integrity of the art.

It is not the lesson. It is the living.

Two of my favorite stories on this concept are from the Buddhist perspective and are quite similar. The first is adapted from Steve Hagen's *Buddhism: Plain and Simple* (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle Co., Inc., 1997; 9-10):

The lessons we learn and their origins, be they writings or the words of a teacher, can be likened to a raft. A raft is a very handy thing to carry you across the water, from one shore to another. But once you've reached the other shore, you no longer need the raft. Indeed, if you wish to continue your journey beyond the shore, you must leave the raft behind. Our problem is that we tend to fall in love with the raft. Before long, we think, "This has been a very good raft; it has served me well. I want to hang onto it and take it with me as I continue my journey." If we hang onto the lessons, the writings, the teachings that we have found to be of assistance in our journey, they soon become a hindrance.

The second comes from Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, & Liberation* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1998; 16):

A sutra or a Dharma talk is not insight in and of itself. It is a means of presenting insight, words and notions. When you use a map to get to Paris, once you have arrived, you can put the map away and enjoy being in Paris. If you spend all your time with your map, if you get caught up in the words and notions, you miss the reality.

How does this relate to our journey with T'ai Chi?



"If you spend all your time with your map, if you get caught up in the words and notions, you miss the reality."

If you've been on the mat or in the room with Water Tiger, you've probably heard me say something along the lines of "we don't teach the choreography of T'ai Chi, we teach the art of T'ai Chi."

Working to make your movements conform to the external appearance of someone else's play while they presented a lesson or to a principle that was lifted from ink on paper or coding on a screen is choreography. The art of T'ai Chi is taking that lesson or that reading, chewing it — bite by bite — thoroughly, tasting its various flavors, swallowing it, digesting its nutrients, and expelling its waste products.

It is not the lesson. It is the living.

Don't get me wrong. We need to read. We need the lessons on the mat or in the room. But, we need to explore the truth of what we've read and what we've learned through the unfolding of the play. The challenge is to let the play reveal the meaning of what we've read and what we've learned instead of allowing the reading and the lessons to dictate how we play.

When we use the play as our gateway to understanding, the body will tell us how it can move to reflect what we believe we know. This pathway will allow the body to teach us the truth of what we have read or experienced.

When we use what we have read or experienced to drive the movement, the mind will tell the body how to move and convince us that what we are doing — regardless of how difficult or uncomfortable — is the correct way to do it.

A simple example of how this manifests is when a correction is made and the student's response is: "That's so much easier than what I was doing."

A more complex example can be found in how I have come to understand the 13 Root Energies of T'ai Chi Ch'uan. As I was taught and as I have read, I initially understood that different postures have martial applications rooted in different energies, e.g., *Repulse the Monkey* is all about pulling energy and *Rollback* is all about leading energy. This is no less true today, but there is so much more to the 13. As I listened to my body in the play, I came to realize that the complexity of what was unfolding from the top of my head to the tips of my toes was because all 13 energies were unfolding throughout my body in each and every moment of my play. This made simple what had been complex. Had what I had been taught and what I had read guided my exploration alone, it wouldn't have opened the door to understanding that my body did.

Discard the raft. Drop the map. Live the journey.

