## WHY I TALK A LOT By Laoshi Laurince McElroy Originally published March 2018

Experience has taught me over the years that the syllabi I hand out in Water Tiger's public classes need to have a few caveats. They include things like recognizing the need for physical contact, the infusion of humor into the lessons, and this one:

We teach the art of T'ai Chi, not its choreography. This means there will be more principle, theory, and detail in what we present.



I tell the participants that what this means is that I will talk a lot. I joke that it's not because I like the sound of my own voice, but that it is a necessary part of our time together. I tell them that it is my goal to teach them more of the "why" of what we do, i.e., the art, than it is to teach them the "what" of what we do, i.e., the choreography.

Even with this caveat and the explanation, there are still times when I receive completed evaluation forms with a comment that reads something like this: "You talk too much."

So, what is it that makes understanding the "why" more than the "what" reliant on words?

One of those things is that everyone learns differently and an image or description that works for one may not work for another. There's a phrase that became part of my vernacular many years ago: "Keep talking until I understand." I feel I'm actually charged with that task when I am in the front. So, I will keep talking until someone understands. Think about the process in this way, as described by an associate of Water Tiger, Tim Duehring, in his July 2, 2010, posterous.com blog post "Spaghetti":

One of my wise students came up with this analogy today. Learning Taiji is a lot like testing to see if spaghetti is done. Spaghetti is considered done when you toss a piece at the wall or ceiling and it sticks. The teacher keeps throwing out handfuls of spaghetti and every once is a while a piece will stick and you go "Aha!".

Perhaps there's an issue with how someone is manifesting *Ward-Off* in our first form, *Grasp Sparrow's Tail to the Four Cardinal Directions* and the execution is too forward. The "throw-the-Frisbee" image hasn't been enough. I introduce and play the basic martial application with them. That doesn't work. I detail the weight and energy exchanges in the legs plus the importance of the nail points in the feet. That doesn't work. Perhaps I pull out the Japanese pellet drum I bought at the end of the year. That doesn't work. I say the movement to the end-of-posture in the extending arm is like whipping an 180° turn in a fast moving car. Suddenly there is a look of understanding.

Let's not forget: many times the someone in this example has no idea there is actually an issue in how they are moving. Why? Because they are caught up in the choreography and not the reasons underlying why the hands are where they are and why the feet are where they are. There is no art.

I have no argument with the idea that the art is learned through the playing. I actually firmly believe that such is the truth, as I have experienced it in my own journey. That journey began in the room with Mesmer Sifu at Black Dragon School where our time in the studio was not just moving, moving, moving. That was for practice outside the studio. We drilled into movements, moments, principles, etc. Such requires not only floor exercises and form play, but discussions of the theories and reasons for why things are the way they are. Without them, your T'ai Chi Ch'uan is shallow, artless.

Look at it this way: we are painters. T'ai Chi Ch'uan is the paint. Our bodies are the canvas. When we focus on putting things in the right place at the right time, we are only painting by numbers. When we drill into the details to truly understand how and why this foot is connected to that hand and this part of the body is turning this way while that part of the body is twisting that way, etc., we are beginning to blend the lines between the various numbered splotches of paint — and our painting is becoming something more than the result of a kit we bought at Michael's into something that is worthy of a gallery opening.

Yes, sometimes solo play is enough. Sometimes a demonstration, or group play can be a rich learning experience. But, we communicate through words — like the ones that you are reading right now. It takes words to get beyond the surface that is the movement. It takes words to understand what the movement hasn't revealed to us. It takes spoken words to make clear the words we have read elsewhere.

So, I don't talk to hear my own voice. I don't talk to fill time. I talk to help. I talk to clarify. I talk to point you in the direction of the next, difficult step on your journey.

I can only hope that you listen.

