



The Key to Success

Let us consider what diverts many people from the proper way.

Lao Tse writes *"If I have even just a little sense, I will walk on the main road and my only fear will be of straying from it. Keeping to the main road is easy, but people love to be side-tracked."*¹

The world of Tai Chi is populated with so many different variants of the original five styles that it is tempting to conclude that "mastery" can be demonstrated by being able to perform a large number of different sets. There is certainly no shortage of options. Even within the tightly-regulated Chen style, there is the 19-move Form, the 38-move Form, the traditional Old Form (First & Second Forms), as well as Chen Fa-ke's New Form (both First & Second versions). If we move on to consider the much less tightly controlled Yang style, where the founding family does not have the global influence which the Chen family is able to exert, the situation is even more confused. There is the 24-move Form, the 48-move Form, the "Beijing" Form, the traditional 108-move Long Form, with large, medium, and small circle variants. As if that were not enough, the Chinese sporting authorities have been actively promoting "competition forms" which, themselves, incorporate within one single form elements from each of the main Tai Chi styles. Let us not forget, either, that each of the traditions has its own group of weapons forms.

Hopefully, by now the sheer futility of trying to develop high levels of familiarity with all of these is clear.

Moreover, it is also completely pointless when one considers that all styles share the same core principles regarding softness, the centrality of the Dantien, the need to move the whole body as one unit, and the importance of intent; using the mind to direct the chi and the body. How much more productive it is to address these issues rather than chasing after yet another style; memorising one more form.

The classics have been telling students for generations that ultimately there is no "form"; everything becomes Tai Chi once one has internalised the principles and incorporated them into everyday movements and, on a philosophical level, into everyday life. Holding fast to the centre is a core tenet of Taoism, leading us to reject all extraneous temptations in favour of concentrating our limited time and energies on what will truly improve our skill and insight. *"In the pursuit of learning, every day something is acquired. In the pursuit of Tao, every day something is dropped."*²

¹ *Tao te Ching*, Chapter 53.

² *Tao te Ching*, Chapter 48.

Whilst ego can drive us to excel, as often as not it blinds us to our own shortcomings and leads us to concentrate on what will impress others, or make us feel good, or both; to excel at the superficial rather than the substantial.

Ironically, by contrast, true skill seems effortless, concealing from an undiscerning onlooker just how much skill has really been built up. "Great accomplishment", we are told "seems imperfect."³ Grandmaster Chen considers there to be 5 levels of achievement but tells us there is no "top". Perfection eludes us all, but that, fortunately, enables us all to improve for ever: provided we know how to.

Grandmaster explains it as follows:

The most important thing in practising is not to get familiar with the form itself, but to establish the correct body mechanics. Some people worry that we are losing our traditional martial arts. They argue that if each teacher tries to hold back just one of his best techniques, eventually the whole art will be lost. This is a very pessimistic view, and it is groundless. The loss of one special technique, even the loss of a whole form, is not the loss of the art. As long as the method of establishing the correct body mechanics is not lost, the art is not lost. On the other hand, if all the forms, including all the weapons forms, are there but the body mechanics are lost, then the art is lost.⁴

No-one should therefore ignore the basics nor be so grand as to imagine that they no longer have to train in them. The wise will embrace them and, without fuss or fanfare, eventually become truly proficient.

³ *Tao te Ching*, Chapter 45.

⁴ *Chen Family Tai Chi Chuan*, pages 326/7