

Why I Train
or
The Never Ending Story

Debra Meadow

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I was, from all outer appearances, in the prime of my life: 39 years old and generally perceived to be a healthy, fit person. After all, I was a runner and cyclist and sometimes-swimmer who trained for races and triathlons. I also hit the gym at least three times a week to lift weights and take grueling aerobic classes.

By the time I arrived at the doorstep of Sifu Gregory Fong's tai chi class, this healthy, fit body was a mess. My lower back ached. My knees hurt. I was given to frequent headaches and I caught a cold almost every month. Yes, I was in the prime of my life. *Prime-arily* in pain.

A friend who had been training with Sifu Fong for several years gently but repeatedly explained to me how tai chi might help me. She was patient and reminded me numerous times over the two years it took me to take her up on her offer to bring me to class to meet her teacher.

I can be stubborn. Tai chi sounded to me like non-exercise. What I had seen of it was silk-clad seniors in the park gracefully waving their hands through the air, either in real life or on television advertisements for anti-inflammatory drugs. I was convinced that to be healthy and fit I needed to sweat and strain and push myself to the max. Why, then, was I seldom both healthy and pain-free?

Little did I know of the sweat, effort and ultimate challenge to come.

Like those who have given up addiction on a particular day, I count my new life beginning January 4, 1999, though it would take a few months to realize it. That's the

thing about Sifu Fong's tai chi class: for quite a while there is a lot of taking it on faith that all these strange movements have a purpose and that eventually you will understand what it is. A simple command, like "drop your chest," or even just "relax," becomes something for the body and mind to ponder and work at.

During the first class Sifu inquires of new students as to any pain or injury they have, especially in the back and knees. He tailors the exercises accordingly. One thing I came to understand after months of training is that after a few classes Sifu knows your abilities and limitations better than you do and once he knows what you can do, he will challenge you, each time, to go a little further. In this way the class is quite personalized, and therefore appropriate for all ages and all levels of fitness.

For the first few weeks my knees hurt more than ever, but in a new way. When I asked about this, Sifu inquired as to the nature of my pain. My answer assured him that this was "good pain." He told me that in X months, if I did Y exercises, I would have Z% less pain. He was exactly right in his prediction. Ensuing predictions came true as well. It seemed like magic. How could he know these things?

After four-plus years, I too know a few of these things. I know that if my body and my mind do not seem to understand how to make a certain movement happen, if I keep at it, keep focusing on the desired movement, eventually, it will become clear, like switching on the proverbial light bulb. I know that I can at once sit down and stand up, or go forward and go backward at the same time. I know better how to hold myself and move through space in a way that maximizes my strength, health and power of mind and body. I know that standing meditations – the foundation of training – are difficult to do but that if I do them each morning there is a feeling of well being that follows me through the day.

I am not prone to following through on things or sticking with one pursuit for a long time. I get bored when the endeavor ceases to be creative, when I am no longer discovering anything new. At first I thought tai chi was boring and that it was just one of those things I would have to do, like paying the electric bill or forgoing French fries. Now I know differently. When doing tai chi properly one's mind is totally engaged and boredom is not possible. Tai chi builds a strong body and a powerful mind. It is

intensely creative: energy, strength, power, health. The body becomes a veritable labyrinth to explore and discover.

I know I will still be practicing tai chi in five, ten, twenty years, and beyond, but my motivations will change over time. Tai chi is a process and processes by their nature are not static. Tai chi is a never-ending process, which is what makes it so riveting. You will never finish, yet you will always be attaining: new levels, new insights, new outlooks.

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