

Through the looking glass

Mike Henderson

Should the tai chi forms be practised on both sides (as a mirror image) is one of those questions that is often discussed. Many teachers encourage their students to practise their forms on both sides, and some do not. While it is universally agreed that all form applications need to be practised on both sides, the benefits gained from applying this to the forms themselves is open to debate. It probably depends on how you view the form in relation to your overall tai chi practice

You can see the form as a repository of technique and as such you should include as many applications as you can within its structure. This means that you can place extra emphasis and focus on each individual move. If you take this attitude then it is a logical extension to do the form on both sides as all applications are done on both sides. This allows a better balance of both body and mind allowing greater practice flexibility. It also encourages the practitioner to gain a greater balance in their form and strengthens their weaker side.

However many teachers take a more minimalistic approach, stripping away any extraneous movement to reach a fundamental core, or essence if you like, of tai chi practice. All moves come from martial application and not the other way round so, if you apply the core concepts of the form it should not matter on which side the forms are practised, the information being already embedded within the form itself.

Some instructors believe that the form should definitely not be practised on both sides, citing the body's lack of symmetry (we only have one heart etc). These teachers say, for example, that single whip is designed to open the lung meridian but when performed on the other side it closes this meridian. Similar reasons are cited for other moves that are only practised one sided in the form. The health aspect of the form is a whole other subject.

From a teaching point of view, however, it makes a lot of sense to be able to perform mirror image for the students, so I believe that it is important to practise forms on the left because of that. The alternative may be to demonstrate with your back to the class and claim to have eyes in the back of your head.

I have found that learning and practising mirror forms may expose weaknesses in your forms that need to be addressed. This is a very positive advantage to practising forms on both sides.

From a student's perspective, if you are confident in your forms there really should be no need to be taught the mirror image in class as you should be able to work it out for yourself. If you can't, then you probably need more work on your basic form.


That realisation in itself is a positive argument for attempting to learn mirror forms.



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My biggest problem with teaching the form on both sides too soon is that if you start on the left before you are completely confident and polished on the right, you need a lot more than double the practice time to 'perfect' both. If you have a fairly fixed amount of time for practice you should stick to one side till you have gained enough understanding to be able to move on to the opposite side with confidence.

Differing approaches to teaching the forms on both sides are valid and rely on individual interpretations of the form and their relations to the martial moves that they are based on. A lot will come down to a teacher's or student's enthusiasms. Remember the old saying – What good is having a hundred knives if none of them are sharp?

Bottom line – don't worry about it, enjoy your tai chi journey and practise, practise, practise. 

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