

The power of song

Cheng Man-ch'ing said that song is tai chi's greatest value. His essay on the positive application of song explains how the simple act of being relaxed is hard to learn but has great benefits once you 'get it'. He admits that it took him almost 50 years of practice. His essay on song is translated by James Chan, Ph.D

Tai chi is not only the best exercise in China but also in the world today. No other forms of exercise or martial art can compare with it. Why?

There exists in tai chi a most exquisite philosophy. First and foremost, tai chi focuses on song. I have been practising tai chi for 50 years and, not until two years ago, did I fully realise the essence of song.

What is it about this ability to be song that makes it so immensely useful? I learned and preached relentlessly for decades about the importance of achieving song in practising tai chi. But what did song mean? How does one get to be perfectly song? I found it extremely difficult to explain it to people.

It wasn't until two years ago that I had my eureka moment. I recalled what my teacher, master Yang Chengfu, used to say to me. Master Yang was not much into talking. He could sit there all day and not speak a word. Unless I said something to him, he would not bother to talk. On the other hand, when it came to the concept of song, he would repeat and repeat himself ad infinitum even if my ears were full. Not only that, but he also said something quite odd: "I must repeat myself about the importance of song. Otherwise, you'll never get it even if you could live three times as long."

The sacks we carry

I doubted what he had said. I wondered why such a concept should be so hard to grasp.

Now it is clear to me. Frankly, I might not have understood song even if my life were six times as long. I hope that once I put it in the following manner, you'll find it easier to grasp its meaning and essence.

Imagine visiting a Buddhist temple. In the first hall, you see a Maitreya Buddha with a large paunch and wearing a big smile. The Buddha holds a cloth bag. Above the statue are the words: "I carry the sack when I sit, and I carry it when I walk. It feels so good to be able to put the sack down." What does this metaphor mean?

It means that we humans are loaded with sacks. We



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carry all kinds of sacks all the time – our children, our spouses, success, fame, fortune, and power. Every one of these sacks is baggage. And the hardest baggage to release is the baggage called me.

Letting go

People talk about how difficult it is to achieve enlightenment in Buddhist practice (like achieving song in tai chi). They refer to ethereal moments of revelations such as "I put down my weapon and became a Buddha" or "I suddenly became a Bodhisattva (one who became enlightened but remained on earth to help others)". Both mental pictures point to the difficulty in realising an abrupt mental breakthrough after years of training – a willingness to let go of one's preconceptions. Achieving song is indeed easier said than done.

Tai chi is hard to learn. The difficulty resides in our inability to let go of preconceptions. If I cannot advance in my tai chi chuan training, it is probably because I cannot let go of my own preconceptions. Transcending our own mental barriers is key to achieving song. 🧘

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