

Tai Chi Dance

By Dennis Kelly

In the book "Tuesdays with Morrie" by Mitch Albom, Morrie, on his death bed, was asked about a perfect day. His response was quite simple; he would wake up, make himself breakfast, spend time with friends and dance. Morrie renewed his spirit under a disco ball. For others, it might be ballroom dancing or Sufi whirling. My dance is T'ai Chi.

Ah, but sometimes the words get in the way. Some practitioners warn against referring to the T'ai Chi solo form as a dance, lest the form be misunderstood simply as choreographed movement.

To most observers, T'ai Chi looks and moves like dance. But it is something far more complex.

The art has many facets. It is a healthy form of exercise, meditation training, the physical embodiment of Taoist insights and a spiritual journey. The foundation of T'ai Chi, and a defining point of difference from other dance forms, is that T'ai Chi is a martial arts system bequeathed to us by the Masters. If one wishes to have the kind of radiant physical, emotional and mental health that characterize accomplished martial artists, one must practice T'ai Chi Chuan as a martial art.

The focus of T'ai Chi is different from traditional dance. Dancers perform their art and express it openly. T'ai Chi students journey inward. They must learn to use their body to cultivate and express energy while concealing their actions. The expressions of energy must be folded within the art. Not so easy.

Metronomic counting and music are often used when practicing T'ai Chi. They also play to the dance reference.

Master Liang reflecting on the use of music, says "After practicing T'ai Chi with music for a sufficient length of time, you will forget the music, the movements and even yourself, although you will proceed as usual. At this stage, you will be in a trance and your five attributes - form, perception, consciousness, action and knowledge - will be empty. This is complete relaxation of the body and mind. It is very good for health and the way to immortality. Of course, if you can reach the highest level while practicing T'ai Chi without counting or music so much the better. I cannot do it because I am a human being - an ordinary, ignorant person with a heart like a monkey and a mind like a horse. I must use music as a means of concentration, as a stepping stone to the highest level of T'ai Chi." (1)

At the highest level of Tai Chi, the body moves without pause or hesitation, unfurling and then withdrawing without effort. Every single gesture spirals throughout the body naturally opening and closing the joints. The body ripples and flows like water. And when you achieve this state, you are no longer *dancing*. *You're being danced*.

(1) Master T.T. Liang, "Imagination Becomes Reality," (1992), p. 60.

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Kelly is a long time practitioner of the martial art of Tai Chi and an on-going contributor to the Tai Chi publication Wu Dang.