

T'ai-Chi for Geniuses

*A Practice Companion
for the Genius
in Everyone*

By Gene Burnett

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Before beginning to study T'ai-Chi or any other movement art it's important to remember that not all movements are suitable for all people. Even though the basic movements of T'ai-Chi are done slowly and gently, they are not risk free. Please consult your physician before beginning this or any other exercise program. Also, this book is meant to be a companion to study with a competent teacher. It is not meant to be a substitute for personal instruction.

INTRODUCTION

GETTING STARTED: T'AI-CHI AND THE GENIUS INSIDE YOU

There are lots of “how to” books for “dummies” and “complete idiots.” This is not one of those books. This book is for the genius in you, the part of you that knows when something is right and when it’s not, the part of you that knows who you can trust and who you can’t, the part of you that knows vastly more than your conscious intellect. We all have this intuitive intelligence within us, but the culture we live in, like all cultures and subcultures, is more interested in maintaining itself than it is in helping you listen to and trust your own genius. No culture, subculture or family anywhere has ever been about that. All cultures curtail freedom in order to perpetuate themselves and hopefully contribute vital stability, pleasure and cohesiveness to the lives of the people within them. Unfortunately in the process of making life safer, our culture often leaves us with little or no connection to our own intuitive sense of rightness. In our confusion we tend to trust authorities to tell us what to do, since they “know better.” Sometimes we are admonished to listen to and follow authorities so that we don’t have to “reinvent the wheel,” that is, spend a lot of time and energy rediscovering something that’s already been found out. When it comes to something like building a bridge or doing surgery I completely agree.

You are not going to explore your way into these kinds of activities very easily on your own, and relying on the years of research that went before you seems like a pretty smart thing to do. But with simpler, more basic human activities like standing, moving, breathing, and keeping your body from harm, I believe “reinventing the wheel” is much better than blindly trusting authorities to tell you what to do. Authorities can be helpful, but what you discover yourself, what you “reinvent,” will be much more alive and much more yours. Nature gave you a miraculous brain, an incredibly adaptable versatile intelligence that took billions of years to evolve. When that intelligence is fully alive in a person who feels safe to explore and learn, we call that person a “genius.”

This book is about learning to listen to and trust the genius inside you. It’s about allowing your genius to function as a kind of inner compass. Your inner genius can help you set goals and directions, but it can also help you choose how to get where you’re going and who to trust along the way. Learning to trust this inner genius is not a quick and easy process. It involves trial and error and the errors are sometimes painful. Sometimes what seems like your inner genius telling you to do something is actually not. When it is not, the results you get will feel wrong. When it is your inner genius you’ve been listening to, the results you get will feel right. This is an ongoing process that never ends, since life, you, and your inner genius are in constant motion. What feels right today may not feel right tomorrow. Listening to your inner genius means maintaining an open, inquiring, and unfinished mind and body.

This book is also about T’ai-Chi. T’ai-Chi is a Chinese word which has been translated as “Supreme Ultimate.” T’ai-Chi Ch’uan, the art that most people call “T’ai-Chi,” has been translated as “Supreme Ultimate Fist” or “Supreme Ultimate Boxing.” When you hear “Supreme Ultimate Boxing” you might think that this means “The Best Boxing.” The actual

meaning, as I see it, is closer to “The Martial Art Based on the Underlying Supreme Ultimate Principle of the Unforced Balance of Yin and Yang Energies.” Or more simply: “Balance Boxing.”

T'ai-Chi then, is a Chinese martial art based on the principle of harmonizing Yin (feminine, soft energy) and Yang (masculine, hard energy). It is considered a “soft style” martial art. What distinguishes so called “soft styles” of martial arts from so called “hard styles” is that in the soft styles you rely primarily on relaxation, efficiency, and technique rather than primarily on strength, speed and power. You use combinations of smaller muscles that are correctly coordinated rather than forcing things with the bigger muscles. You also rely on body position and efficient use of energy. These skills take years to learn and integrate into your body. If you want to be able to use them in serious combat situations, it takes even longer. This is one of the reasons why we train and move slowly and carefully from the inside out. We are aiming for a level of grace and total body coordination that is just not possible to rush through.

So the basic training of this art is done in slow motion and is usually taught slowly as well. This training consists of “forms” which are sequences of movements that help train the body to be more balanced, strong and relaxed. One reason the forms are practiced and taught slowly is to give practitioners time to safely study and build their movement vocabulary. Another reason is that in T'ai-Chi we are looking to bring a presence or unifying consciousness to the mind and body, and this quality is more easily discovered while moving slowly. Eventually, it is possible to not only do T'ai-Chi forms with more speed and power, but also to learn many complicated movements in a single lesson.

Although T'ai-Chi is a martial art, its forms are often practiced by people who are not really interested in the martial art applications of the movements. This is because the basic

training itself is healthy, feels good, and contributes to better balance, which is useful in many arenas besides martial arts. There are also T'ai-Chi partner exercises, which add a deeper dimension to the training. And again there are people who practice these exercises not with fighting in mind, but simply because they enjoy them and benefit from going deeper.

In my own teaching and training, I like to make a distinction between martial training and combat training. To me, "martial" means training in body protecting movements and "combat" means training to fight. Even if you are not interested in combat training, you might benefit from and enjoy martial training. Martial training includes protecting the body from disease, falling, accidents, gravity and many other sometimes hardly noticeable dangers, including psychological attacks and the effects of bad posture.

The principles of T'ai-Chi can also be applied to many areas of life, so you don't even have to be a T'ai-Chi student to get value from this book. You can use T'ai-Chi principles to improve your enjoyment and skill in any art, practice, activity or endeavor you engage in. T'ai-Chi is the art of finding unforced balance, and this is helpful no matter what you're doing.

In this process of listening to my own inner genius and finding my own sense of T'ai-Chi, I presume wholeness. That is, I presume that this entire universe is actually one indivisible whole. It all seems to be made of the same mysterious stuff that can be transformed but not created or destroyed. "Separate" things exist only in our minds. If, for example, you look at a tree, it looks like a separate thing. But where exactly does the tree end and the air and dirt around it begin? How could it exist without food, water, sunlight and, more importantly, gravity? It really has no independent existence at all. And neither do we. We are part of a huge interdependent wholeness that is constantly in motion, constantly becoming something else.

It's certainly helpful to see the apparent separateness of the objects around us as "real." It makes our life and survival much easier. However, I like to balance this apparent separateness with an underlying presumption of the wholeness of things. I recognize the everyday world of separate objects, but I presume an underlying wholeness, a wholeness that is always balanced within itself, a wholeness out of which my own body and sense of self has emerged. I further presume that within my body and sense of self are the keys to consciously aligning with the wholeness that created them. The inner physical sense of rightness within me is what I call my genius. Without it T'ai-Chi would not be a living, breathing experience. It would be a dead museum piece, a repeating of what other geniuses created long ago. I like museums, but most museums are about knowledge and the past, not the living moment happening now.

If you believe nothing written here and insist on personal experience, T'ai-Chi will be possible for you. I've been studying and researching T'ai-Chi for over twenty years and I've learned a few things that I think are valuable. However, I can't tell you what is right for you, what will work for you, or what the best way for you to practice is. What I'm offering here is my opinion and my experience. I invite you to keep an open mind, hear what I have to say, and then listen to your own inner genius, your own inner sense of rightness, and see what happens. My hope is that the views and information contained in this book can help you become your own teacher and your own student. T'ai-Chi, like everything else in this universe (including you), is a work in progress, an experiment in motion. It resists being pinned down and understood. Even if part of you craves certainty and absolute truth in black and white, your inner genius knows better. Trust it.

First Things First

Your genius has an amazing ability to inform and guide your progress in anything you choose to do. However, it does have limits. Before it can inform you, it often needs information itself. It may be that you could go into a room right now and doing nothing but listening to your own inner sense of rightness, invent T'ai-Chi from scratch. It may be that you could learn T'ai-Chi from a book. It may be that I could hold up a T'ai-Chi Yin/Yang symbol and say, "Move like this." But these are not the ways most people discover and learn T'ai-Chi. Most of us need training games and we need teachers. We need safe ways to invite our resistance to T'ai-Chi to the surface, and then safe ways to surrender it and find an unforced balance. These training games are the forms and exercises I mentioned earlier. Some are done by yourself, like a solo dance; some involve partners; some involve weapons. I believe we need these games; and we need teachers, people who've played these training games and can help us with the many pitfalls we encounter playing them. That said, how do you find the right teacher for you? (If you're already studying T'ai-Chi the process described below can help you clarify your choice of teachers or help you decide if you need a new one. You can also use this process to help you find a guitar teacher or any other kind of teacher.)

I started T'ai-Chi in 1984 when I was 27 years old. I had left New York City and the pursuit of a career in music to live with nature in the San Juan Islands in Washington State. After spending a year living in a small cabin on a small island with my girlfriend and her family, I realized that I'd have to return to the city at some point. I just knew that it was too early in my life to be living in the woods or even in a small town. I knew that my life was missing something vital. I wasn't sure what it was, but I knew that whatever it was, it was in the city. After much soul searching I realized that I'd

always loved physical games when I was a kid. I particularly enjoyed things like tree climbing, doing tricks on my bike, anything that involved focusing my entire body and mind on a specific coordinated task. I wasn't particularly good at these things, but I really enjoyed them. As I got older, more mental and adult pleasures took over and I all but forgot my childhood inclinations. Somehow in my soul-searching process on the island I remembered them. I also realized that I'd always loved teaching people things. And so, it came to me one day, and my genius immediately approved, that I would move to Seattle, learn something physical that I really enjoyed, and then teach it for a living. Simple enough. My first thoughts ran to Yoga and T'ai-Chi, both of which I had a small amount of experience with and had always held a fascination for me. I also decided to learn to do massage, because I wanted to learn something that I could do right away. I assumed (wrongly it turned out) that I would enjoy doing massage and that it would be many years before I could begin teaching Yoga or T'ai-Chi.

When I arrived in Seattle, very few people were teaching T'ai-Chi. My girlfriend's mother inquired at work and found that a co-worker did T'ai-Chi and gave me his number. At the time I had an evening job and I really wanted to find a teacher who taught during the day. As it turned out, this person's teacher only taught at night, but he did refer me to someone who in turn referred me to Andy Dale, who, it turned out, was the best possible teacher for me to have found. The first time I saw him move I was totally amazed and inspired. I knew right away that I wanted to move like he did someday. And the only reason I ended up seeing him move in the first place is that he was the only guy in town teaching a morning class!

I mention all this because it illustrates an important principle. Simply put: Soul Searching + Persistence + Luck = The Right Teacher. One thing I recommend highly is asking yourself key questions and then listening for an answer that

feels right. How do you know what the key questions are? Just ask what feels the most right to ask now and see how that feels. Often in the process of self-inquiry I realize that I'm asking the wrong question. In my experience, when I ask the right question, there is a distinct physical "Yes!" feeling in the center of my body. And when I find the right answer, there's an even stronger feeling. Listening for this inner physical sense of "Yes" and "No" is the essence of letting your genius guide your life.

So here's what I recommend. First of all, ask yourself why you are interested in T'ai-Chi in the first place. This is a good question to ask about your interest in any activity, whether you're just getting started or have been doing it for years. Why do you want to learn to play the flute? Or learn how to tango? Or learn how to surf? Or run a business? What's missing in your life? What do you hope to get by studying this new thing? Really listen to what you come up with. It's very helpful to sit or lie in a relaxed position with no pressing deadlines and just ask these questions and listen to what answers come. For me, I was missing a sense of having something valuable that I could trade with other people and thereby make a living. I was missing a sense of physical enjoyment, challenge and skill. I was missing a way to transmit abstract knowledge to others without just talking. I was missing a sense of being in balance, especially in the physical world. I was also interested in martial arts, but not in hard styles. But those were just my answers. Yours may be entirely different.

Here are some of the reasons people decide to study T'ai-Chi:

- To feel more connectedness in life
- To improve balance
- To gently increase fitness, self-awareness and grace
- To help heal an injury or illness
- To improve posture

- To prepare for more vigorous weight-loss exercise
- To develop a quiet, personal practice of self-exploration
- To get more grounded
- To slow down and relax
- To better understand relationships

Another thing I recommend that you examine what your mission here on Earth actually is. I think everyone has a mission at any particular time. It may and often does shift and change, but it is always there. It isn't that you have to decide what it is. It's there now. Whether you are conscious of it or not, your life has a certain direction. There is an inner desire, a "calling" to pursue certain goals. Start by asking yourself what are the activities in which you feel the most alive? What is it about these activities that is so exciting or joyful or peaceful? What are the activities in which you feel the most deeply right, the most yourself? Try not to be "good" or "spiritual" or politically correct. Try not to think it out too much. Just answer truthfully what really makes you come alive. What do you really like doing?

The next step is to ask, "What is it exactly that I like about these activities?" I've found it a very revealing and interesting line of thought to pursue, and I invite you to give it a try. Keep asking until you know exactly why you like the kinds of things you do. Don't settle for answers like "It's fun." Keep digging for more precise answers and you'll be getting closer to your mission. If the answers you come up with result in a definite, physical sense of "Yes!", then you're on the right track.

After you've come up with some things you really like doing, and know more specifically why you like doing them, the next step is to ask yourself, "What do these things have in common?" What is the guiding intent that unifies and gives meaning to all of your favorite activities? Look for a simple general statement or idea. Missions are not usually compli-

cated. The answer might not come right away. That's not a bad thing. Your mission might be to find your mission.

You might also come up with something that another part of you doesn't like. For instance, you might discover that your mission is to prove to your father that you're not a loser. You might discover that your mission is to open a restaurant. You might find that your mission is to defeat other people in competitions and show the world that you're worthwhile. You may also come up with a simple truth that explains all the interests you've ever had since childhood. You may realize that you love beauty in all its forms and your mission is to bring beauty to other people. Or you may realize that your mission is to preserve wild nature for future generations to enjoy. Whatever it is, you'll know you're on the right track if you don't need to force yourself to move in the direction of this mission. If it feels like a drag, like you have to make yourself approach this mission, it's probably a mission that you'd like to be your mission, but isn't.

I'm not saying that your mission should be easy or that there should be no sense of work or obstacles. I'm saying that if it doesn't excite you, doesn't stir you to action in any way, then it's probably not your mission. There are not too many things worse than living your life pursuing someone else's mission.

So, inquire into these things: What is your mission? What is missing from your life? Why do you want to do T'ai-Chi? What do you hope to gain by learning T'ai-Chi? You don't have to definitively answer all these things, but having a sense of what your answers are will help you in many ways, especially if you keep asking these questions over and over as the years go by.

Right now, answering these questions will help you find the right teacher for you. Self-inquiry is the first part of our equation. I invite you to take your time and don't be in a hurry to keep reading. You may want to put this book down and give these questions a serious look for a few days, weeks, or even months.

Finding a Teacher

Now I'm assuming you've given some thought to what your mission is and why you're interested in T'ai-Chi. You may not have come up with any absolutely certain answers, but I'll bet that in the process of looking into these questions, you've emerged with at least a little better sense of what you're after. Having a sense of your mission and what you're looking for can help you find the right teacher for you. If you already have a teacher, it can help you decide if the teacher you've found is still right for you. If you have some vague interest in T'ai-Chi as something cool or spiritual, you could still find a good teacher and still develop some real skills, but it just isn't likely. If you know what you want, then you can look around and see if any of the teachers in your area seem to have it.

Here's an example. Let's say after some soul searching you've come to the conclusion that you have no idea what your mission is. You've realized that your inner sense of confidence is minimal. You mostly feel fear and confusion when you look inside and perhaps a vague sense of fear or dread about moving towards anything. You don't like this feeling inside you, and you realize that right now your mission is to release this feeling somehow. You'd like to be able to look inside without fear of making a mistake. You'd like to feel confident about your ability to experiment and learn and find better answers to these big questions. Actually, if this was the result of your inquiry, I would say you're doing very well. You have a sense of mission: to develop confidence and not be stopped by fear. You have a sense of what you're missing: confidence and clarity. You have a sense of why you're interested in T'ai-Chi: to help you develop confidence and clarity.

Now you can go shopping. One thing you need to know about the world of T'ai-Chi is that there are different

styles of T'ai-Chi, and within those styles, each teacher has his or her own take or spin on T'ai-Chi. Many of these styles and teachers are at odds with each other. What's correct in one style is incorrect in another. This might seem daunting. How do I decide which style is best? How do I find the best teacher? This is where your self-inquiry and having listened a bit to your inner genius will pay off. Don't worry about finding the best of all styles or the best of all teachers. Your task is to find a style and a teacher who can help you develop more confidence and clarity.

(Remember I'm just using this one example. You might have come up with another mission and set of goals. You might realize that your mission is to run a business but your neck is sore from sitting at a computer. Your main interest in T'ai-chi might be to deal with the sore neck. The important thing is to evaluate your prospective teachers from the standpoint of what you are looking for. Many people do this instinctively; many do not. I'm suggesting that you do it consciously.)

The first thing to do is look around and see who's teaching in your area. Look in the yellow pages, look on bulletin boards, ask your friends. You might see a flyer that just appeals to you. Or a friend might highly recommend someone. Or you can just call every number you get.

I recommend asking if you can watch a beginner's class as well as a more advanced class. Go to some classes and watch them carefully. If a teacher only teaches private lessons, ask if you could watch a lesson or two from a respectful distance. If anyone pressures you to join, just say that you're looking around to see which style and teacher feels right and you haven't decided yet. (A good phrase to remember if you're ever feeling pressured to make a decision is this: "I'll think about it.")

As you watch the class or lesson ask yourself these questions: Is this teacher confident? Does he seem to have the kind of clarity I'm looking for in myself? How does he relate to the students? Is he nervous? Arrogant? Superior? Or is he

friendly, kind and encouraging? In this style, does the way the teacher and students move appeal to you? Does it look scary or overwhelming? Is the class too martially oriented for you? Remember, all you're really looking for at this point in our example is someone who can help you feel more confident and clear. Do the people in the class move with confidence and clarity, or do they at least seem to be heading in that direction?

Another factor to consider is your personal learning style. If you like a lot of explanation when you are learning something new, you'll want an articulate, verbally oriented teacher. You may find that a Chinese teacher who speaks very little English, no matter how good he is at T'ai-Chi, will not work well for you. You might feel much better with, and learn more from, a less skilled teacher who you can understand. On the other hand, if you're more of a physical learner and verbal instruction tends to confuse or bore you, a Chinese-speaking teacher might be perfect for you. You may be someone who needs to develop a personal relationship with a teacher in order to learn from him. A distant, aloof teacher, no matter how good his T'ai-Chi, won't work for you at all. And again, a warm and friendly teacher who isn't as skilled may be just right for you. You can keep these sorts of things in mind as you watch classes or lessons, or you can consult your inner genius for a more general sense of rightness.

No matter what your goal is in studying T'ai-Chi, it is important that you feel safe to explore and learn. One of my main jobs as a teacher is to help people feel safe to explore. Many people don't feel safe to explore because as children, whenever they went out on a limb to try something new, they were instantly and often brutally criticized. All of us have certain areas where we feel safe to explore and others where we don't. Since I'm interested in a fresh, living, moment-to-moment rediscovery of T'ai-Chi, I look for teachers and environments where I feel safe to explore and learn from my mistakes. That's what I'm drawn to and what I recommend.

But if you feel differently, that's OK too. You may really be looking for a more authoritative type of teacher or class. If that's what your genius or "right" feeling is telling you, then I'd recommend following it. Just keep checking as time goes by in case things have changed.

Another thing to look out for, no matter what your main interest in T'ai-Chi, is good knee alignment. The knees are the least "forgiving" joints in our bodies and the easiest to injure. Even if you find a teacher who can help you with developing confidence and clarity, if her knee alignment is bad, chances are yours will be too, and knee problems will undermine any confidence and clarity you may develop. So watch your prospective teacher's knees and the knees of the other students. You may not know a lot about knee alignment and you don't really have to at this point. Just look and see if the teacher's knees are twisting when they move. In other words, are her knees and toes pointing in different directions? Do her feet twist on the ground? Can you see that her weight is tilting towards the big toe or little toe side of the foot? If the answer to any of these questions is "Yes," then I'd advise you to keep looking. No matter what you may want from T'ai-Chi (or anything else you're interested in studying), unless it's becoming injured, you're going to want a teacher with at least pretty good posture.

When you visit a class that feels right to you, it should give you some of that "Yes!" feeling that you got when you first realized that you needed more confidence and clarity within yourself. Since, in this example, you are coming from feeling a certain amount of fear, the right style will probably be one that's not extremely strenuous or combat oriented. The right teacher will probably have a kind and gentle, one-step-at-a-time approach. But I'm just guessing. Some people find that though they start out scared and looking for a very safe class, they end up really attracted to a different type of class once they start shopping.

As you watch and listen, pay attention to what your body and your inner genius tell you. Sometimes a teacher gives lip service to all the things you are looking for, but something just doesn't feel right. If you feel distrustful, listen to that feeling. Pay attention to it. It may grow or diminish with time, but don't brush it aside. You'll also have to pay attention to what your pocket book is telling you. You may find a teacher who feels right for you, but charges more money than you can afford for lessons or classes.

This is the persistence part of our equation. You may need to visit several teachers and watch many classes. You may need to ask around a lot. You may need to explore neighboring communities. You may need to put your search on hold until some new teacher who feels right comes to town. The point here is not to give up without really looking around. If you are persistent and keep listening and checking in with your inner sense of rightness, you can at least come up with the best teacher for you given the choices in your area. Persistence and patience, in addition to helping you find the right teacher for you, are also, in my opinion, the two most essential qualities needed to learn T'ai-Chi.

This was just one example. Your mission and attraction to T'ai-Chi might be completely different. If you start out with an interest in becoming a lineage holder in one of the styles, you'll have to look into the credentials of various teachers. If you start out with a strong attraction to martial arts, you'll have to see what different teachers know about that. The same goes for rehabilitating an injured limb, developing a meditative practice, or just learning to relax. The main idea, though, is the same. Identify what it is you are looking for and listen with your inner sense of rightness as you watch various teachers, classes, or lessons.

As you progress in the art, your goals, even your mission, may change. If that is the case, and you've been consistently checking in with your inner genius, you may find that you need to change teachers. The teacher who helped you develop

confidence and clarity might not be the one who can teach you about self-defense, and that may be what your interest is now. You may develop a deep interest in the history of T'ai-Chi, or in Chinese culture, or in being a lineage holder in one of the styles, or competing in tournaments. This is why it's important to keep checking in with yourself. It's not that you want to be deciding whether to switch teachers every other week. It's just that you will change as time goes by and you may need something that your current teacher doesn't have. If you start with an honest inquiry into what your mission is and what you want from T'ai-Chi, and you keep looking around until you find someone who feels right, you'll be fine. You may end up with a "bad" teacher from the standpoint of training for tournaments, but the perfect teacher to help you with your confidence. With a little luck the right teachers will keep appearing as you need them. My teacher Andy Dale's teacher, Grandmaster Tchoung Ta-Tchen claimed to have had over 25 teachers over the course of his life!

So go shopping, find the best teacher for you and your goals right now, and then continue reading. Or you may want to read the next section as part of your search.

Learning T'ai-Chi

Whether you've found a teacher and are ready to begin, or are still in the process of finding a teacher, there are a few general things about learning T'ai-Chi that are helpful to know. First of all, as I mentioned earlier, there are many different training games within any T'ai-Chi style. Some are solo forms, which are sequences of movements that you do by yourself. Others involve partners and/or weapons. Within each style and even sub-style there are many differences.

As with every other human activity, there is disagreement among T'ai-Chi practitioners about what constitutes correct practice. There is even disagreement about what constitutes T'ai-Chi.

As I see it, all the different styles and sub-styles are opinions about the best way to embody the universal principle of balance that is T'ai-Chi. So you have the Yang family opinion, the Chen family opinion, the Wu family opinion, the Sun family opinion, and a million other sub-opinions that each teacher brings to her teaching. T'ai-Chi itself, the principle of Universal Balance, was here before there was a China or even a planet Earth. Keep in mind that all these different styles are just opinions. Some are better informed than others; some might be more aligned or less aligned with your own goals; but they are just opinions.

There are plenty of T'ai-Chi fundamentalists out there who think that their opinion is “the truth,” that their style is the “true way.” I would advise you to reserve judgment even if you are studying with a teacher of this type. For me, there are teachings that I don't prefer but are not what I would call “bad.” There are teachings that I don't like at all but again I would not call them “bad” or “not T'ai-Chi,” I just don't like them. And then there are teachings that I think are “bad.” The teachings that I think are bad are not just things I don't like or are different from the style that I do. The things I think are bad are bad for your body and health. The things that I think are bad are things like twisting your knees. This is just objectively bad and people who twist their knees regularly end up with “bad” or painful knees.

Every style and teacher has biases, things that are considered good or better than others. For instance, a teacher might say that a certain exercise is better than another. You might ask why that is so. The teacher might reply that this exercise builds more strength. So in this teacher's mind “better” means stronger. Another teacher might say that this or that exercise is better because it helps you relax. To this teacher

“better” might mean more relaxed. I like teachers who state their biases and priorities up front directly. If your teacher does not, you can figure them out yourself. Whenever your teacher or anyone else says that something is “good” or “better” just ask yourself, “Better for what and for whom?” Your teacher’s bias will become apparent if you first realize that he has one, as we all do, and then watch to see what it is.

Here I would like to tell you what my own bias is, what my own priorities are. My primary focus is health and happiness. I think that developing strength and power, for instance, is not a bad thing. But I only want to develop enough strength and power to be happy and healthy. Developing strength and power takes time and energy, neither of which I have in unlimited supply. So I have to ask myself, what do I really want, and how much of my limited resources of time and energy do I want to spend getting it?

Another bias of mine is toward responsiveness and mobility. I want to be able to respond with the right amount of strength and relaxation to meet each situation I find myself in. I call it the “dimmer switch.” I want to be able to “dial in” the appropriate amount of energy for each situation. Rather than having my muscles on an on/off switch, I like to think of them being on a dimmer switch with lots of gradations between on and off.

I also value “neutrality.” Neutrality, as I use the word, is the quality of being ready, open, aware, and with maximum options available. This involves maintaining a certain openness in the joints and a certain readiness in the muscles. It involves avoiding extreme positions, which limit options and mobility.

I’ll say more about neutrality later, but for now, I’m simply stating that my primary priority is on health and happiness, with secondary priorities of maintaining neutrality, readiness, responsiveness, and mobility. Maintaining these qualities in my body effects every area of my life. They are not just my T’ai-Chi priorities: they are my life priorities.

So now you know what my priorities are and by listening and watching your teacher, you'll develop a sense of what your teacher's priorities are. And, having done your homework before finding a teacher, you know something about your own priorities too. This is important because without knowing what your own priorities are, you are at the mercy of others to tell you what is good and bad. With your own priorities in place you'll be in a better place to decide if something is good or bad for you. Not that you'll never make mistakes, but in the constant process of trial and error that is involved in learning anything, you'll have an inner standard to help guide your choices.

Once during a T'ai-Chi class, my teacher Andy Dale told me to relax completely after each movement in the form. As I practiced, I dutifully followed this instruction and settled into the first stance I arrived in. I relaxed everything I could relax and still stay upright. It felt very nice. So I did it again after the next movement. It felt even better. I decided to go through the entire form doing this. After a few more movements I thought, "Wow! This is fantastic! This is the best instruction I've ever been given!" Then I realized that Andy had been saying this to me in almost every class for two years! I'd just been focusing on so many other things in my practice that I hadn't heard him. T'ai-Chi is like that. There is so much to it that you can't possibly take it all in at once.

As a teacher I find that I repeat myself quite a bit, just like Andy did with me, because I never know what a student is ready to hear in any given moment. In this book I do the same thing. I cover similar ground from different angles and repeat myself the same way I do when I teach, because if you are anything at all like me, you need to hear things more than once. You may find too, that the same words will have different meaning for you if you come back to them after you've gained more experience with T'ai-Chi.