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Learning to Unlearn Through T'ai Chi

by Dena Rose

When was the last time you had to remind yourself to relax and take a deep breath? With so many responsibilities at work and at home, most of us think tension just comes with the territory.

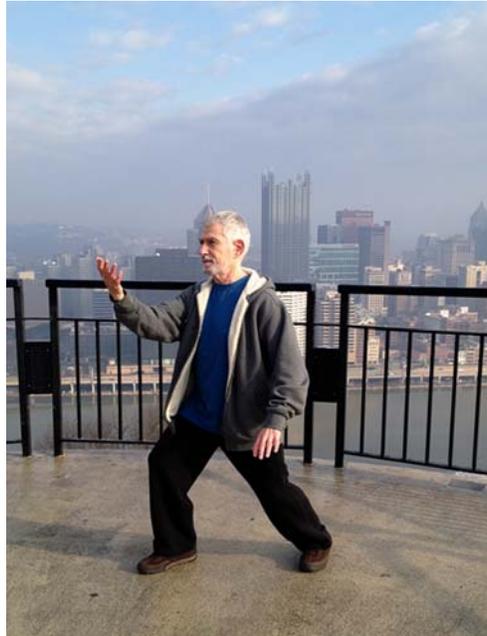
Maybe it's time to meet **Stan Swartz**. Centered, balanced, insightful, relaxed, focused--- describing him is pretty simple. In his presence you will almost instantly feel calm, grounded and "in the moment."

Not coincidentally, these words describe the benefits of the ancient form of exercise Stan has spent 42 years studying, practicing, teaching and promoting: **T'ai Chi Ch'uan**, which translated means Supreme Ultimate Self Discipline, seems too good to be true. The practice (a form of exercise) offers a connection between mind, body and spirit.

These days, who wouldn't want an opportunity to lead a happy, balanced life; become more flexible; let go of fears; become healthy and fit; increase energy and live life to the fullest? All without that mat, expensive outfit, gym equipment and trendy training paraphernalia. Age doesn't matter and all you need is your mind, your body and a willingness to take time to reflect and get to know yourself. Sounds simple. But Stan will tell you, "T'ai Chi is simple...but not easy."

"T'ai Chi can be best described as meditation in movement," Stan said. With daily stress recognized by physicians and psychologists as the leading cause of many physical and mental diseases, he adds that T'ai Chi is also "medication in movement." This centuries-old practice will tone and heal the body, sharpen the mind and reduce stress.

T'ai Chi form consists of 64 movements that are linked together. Students eventually learn the full circle of



Stan Swartz has studied, practiced and taught T'ai Chi Ch'uan for 42 years.

~photo courtesy of Stan Swartz

movements. While students participate in classes, there are no goals or markers; it is an individual effort.

"The human body is designed for movement. When postural alignment is correct it moves gracefully, efficiently and with the least amount of effort within the earth's gravitational field," Stan said.

In order to move efficiently, three factors must perform harmoniously: the nervous system (mind), muscles and bones. The mind initiates and controls the pattern of movement. Muscles translate nerve energy (electrical impulses) or thought into movement of the skeleton. The skeleton is the machine for movement.

Our nervous system allows us to learn, remember and share knowledge based on current or past learning experiences and we use this wisdom to select the best of these experiences. Inside the nervous system exists the built-in software that chooses the most efficient movement. Tension, habit

or injury interferes with this innate knowledge.

T'ai Chi is an unlearning process --- eliminating habits and allowing more simple and natural movements to reappear and heal the body. It promotes more *conscious* movement and students learn how to trust the nervous system's automatic adjustments. This is the way T'ai Chi eliminates the fear that keeps muscles and joints chronically contracted. This release of fear/contraction deepens the breathing, liberates the mind and body, and creates fluid, balanced, efficient movement and respiration.

Now we know: "just breathe" is more than a cliché. Breathing along with moving promote relaxation which is the foundation of health, happiness and self-awareness.

Of course, Stan says it best: "Tension is who you think you are...relaxed is who you really are. T'ai Chi can bring you back to who you really are. It offers wisdom you can carry through your day and life."

*Editor's Note: Stan Swartz has studied T'ai Chi Ch'uan since 1973 with four senior students of Grand Master Cheng Man-ching: Robert W. Smith, Patrick Watson, Tam Gibbs and Benjamin Pang Jeng Lo. Stan has taught in Europe, Puerto Rico, Florida and New York City. In 1982 he returned to Pittsburgh to offer beginning through advanced level classes. Stan's wife, **Patty Swartz**, has been studying T'ai Chi Ch'uan with Stan since 1988, also participating in workshops with the Grand Masters. She also teaches the Eight Methods of T'ai Chi, Beginning Form Classes, and T'ai Chi Workshops for Equestrians, as well as private classes for students with physical limitations. For more information, class locations and schedule visit: swartztaichi.com*