

Walking Straighter

Taken from 'Happy News Citizen Journalist' by Cortney Philip - February 2006

I've always had a secret fascination with T'ai Chi, but I'd never had both the room in my schedule and the extra money at the same time to take a class until five weeks ago. What a blunder I made by not realizing how important T'ai Chi could become in shaping my outlook on life. T'ai Chi isn't something extra to squeeze into a schedule or a superfluous expense, I've discovered, but actually a necessary lesson in how to carry myself through everything I do.

Oh, I admit I went to the first class with a healthy dose of skepticism. Looking around the room while waiting for the instructor, I couldn't help but notice that most of us were overweight and few of us appeared graceful. I suspected that like me, many of my classmates had signed up for the beginner T'ai Chi class hoping to lose some weight as well as learn a martial art form. I thought that I'd made a terrible mistake and that we would be led through dumbed-down exercises and coddled by our instructor. After all, this was community education held at a local elementary school and not a private studio.

My doubts about the quality of community education were quickly cast aside when our instructor appeared. After briefly introducing himself, Joseph told us we would begin every class by putting our feet together and raising our arms in greeting. The right hand became a fist to represent the warrior, and the left hand extended to become the scholar. We put our hands together in front of our hearts, extended our arms and turned to each other with smiles. We weren't to think of ourselves as a group of aging and overweight women after all we were to become warrior-scholars under our instructor's tutelage.

As newly coined warrior-scholars, Joseph taught us a posture and talked us through ten grueling minutes of standing meditation. The purpose of our first exercise, Joseph told us, was not only to begin using our unused muscles but also to learn how our minds deal with pain. Fifteen minutes into our

first class, I was ready to lie down and take a nap.

T'ai Chi was more strenuous exercise than I could have ever anticipated because Joseph apparently had no intention of coddling us. Although we stumbled, flailed, grumbled and grimaced, Joseph knew we would improve over time. Needless to say, as we learn more and more forms, we are turning into the graceful warrior-scholars Joseph knew we would become. And although I know I will ache afterward, I look forward to each class knowing that the pain is worth it.

I have learned many things from my beginning T'ai Chi class. From standing meditation, I've learned that my mind can be clear even when I'm experiencing physical discomfort. I'm no longer as apt to complain when my feet hurt after a long night at work because the ache is only a minor discomfort my mind can process and dismiss. I'm sure that on my next camping trip when it inevitably rains for a week, I'll feel peace of mind despite my soggy sleeping bag.

Believe it or not, in just five weeks of T'ai Chi, I've realized that I've been walking funny all my life. By using what I've learned about proper alignment and weight distribution, I can save my knees and back a

lot of stress. After a long walk now, I feel energized instead of drained, and I no longer hunch over the steering wheel in my car.

It's not just techniques I've learned in class that have changed my posture, though. It's the sense of ownership of my movements and the pride of being a warrior-scholar in training that make me walk straighter. Because I've witnessed a roomful of ordinary people turn into creatures of grace, I've come to recognize the potential for beauty in every human movement I see.

While most of us seem to be aging or slouching, gaining weight or sagging in the wrong places, we all have the potential to become warrior-scholars in spirit, whether we choose to T'ai Chi or not. And that is a beautiful thing, indeed.

