

Learning to Love the Plateau

BY PATRICK FOLEY

Most of us know that the path to true skill comes not just from attending many classes, or reading many books, but from practising what you have learnt. Taijiquan, first and foremost, is the Art of Doing; and it is often a challenge all in itself to maintain a focused practise regime, let alone having to deal with the dreaded 'plateau' where, despite all your efforts, no progress is apparent. Overcoming and actually learning to enjoy this period of apparent stagnation is critical to making progress.

Hand on heart - have we not all experienced that time during our study and practise of a complex task, when you just want to give up in frustration? That elusive technique or quality of feeling just remains, well, elusive - seemingly unachievable. You are totally aware that effort is required to make a breakthrough, but making that effort just doesn't seem to be worth the effort. And of course, there's always a good reason for it too. In today's world, many of us are conditioned not to acknowledge any situation that implies stagnancy, loss or failure; there can only be continuous success, or the instant apportioning of blame when we can't have it. There cannot, under any circumstances, be a plateau, where things just...are; and yet, this is truly the way forward for anything that appears insurmountable.



Path of Endless Gratification vs. Path to mastery

So let me set a backdrop to the issue, using a little of my own personal experience. In the summer of 2020, after 3 months of lockdown and the loss of much of our core teaching business, I caught Covid and though I had relatively mild symptoms, the long 'tail' of recovery lasted for perhaps another 2 months. Though I was still helping manage our school

and teaching online during this period, that's all I could manage - I lost all incentive to progress in my own practise. I just couldn't find a valid enough reason to continue with it; my energy was low; my body non-responsive and my thoughts unclear. As the effects of the virus slowly cleared out of my system, I realised there was more to this than met the eye. I was also in this 'holding pattern' because I was not physically connecting up with my Taijiquan community - over this period of lockdown and travel restrictions, I would normally have attended several workshops with my Sifu and practised many hours with my peer group students, not to mention regular interactions with hundreds of our own students. I realised that it was largely this constant feedback loop of personal connection that kept my practise going, and I was not really achieving it on my own.

In a very subtle way, I had truly plateaued, and at first could see no easy way out of it. And that was the problem - I was looking for an easy way out. I was allowing the limitations I felt to hold me back, rather than recognising that they can in fact be the greatest teachers of how to successfully move forward. By changing my perspective of the situation, I realised that I was depending too much on others and not focusing on what I could achieve quite simply on my own. Being isolated from my 'normal' Tai Chi world was actually an opportunity to explore topics and practises I would not normally make time for. Reading books, catching up on notes and watching videos, even just being out in the garden or countryside were all much more available to me. By allowing this additional exploration to take place I was in fact augmenting my 'usual' understanding of things and deepening my skills.

This understanding crystallised after a private Zoom session with my sifu, Sam Masich, which led me to read a very thought-provoking book



Loss of community and peer support can easily cause you to plateau

called “Mastery”, by George Leonard. The main premise of the book is that in order to be on the path of mastery in any discipline, you need 5 ‘keys’ - instruction; practise; surrender; intentionality and the edge.

What I would like to focus on in this article is the ‘key’ of practise, particularly with the view of practising toward mastery. Not all of us want mastery of course; we may be perfectly content to just enjoy the social aspect of our chosen discipline, do our exercises and stay healthy - nothing wrong with that. Some of us want mastery, but expect it to be handed to us on a plate (“surely now that I have done 100 lessons, I am by default a high level practitioner?!”). Mastery means you are making your own path, not always expecting to be rewarded with climax after climax. To actually be satisfied with the fact that sometimes, you just have to keep swimming, and be where you are. You have to learn to love the plateau, and when progress is made, you don’t get bound by it, knowing that a new plateau is just around the corner.

Be grateful for the opportunity to deepen what you already know.

The thing was, I already knew about how to stay on the path to mastery. Many years ago I managed a small manufacturing company making futon bed bases, and probably spent as much time on the shop floor as in the office. The bases were made from 2x1” pine slats that had to be cut to length then sanded, chamfered and end-finished on a high speed router and industrial belt sander. There were around 40 slats to each base, and over 4 or 5 years we must have made many hundreds of these bases. After you had prepared your first 20-30 slats, you basically knew how to do the job - the angle to hold the length of wood; the amount of pressure to use; how to keep your

fingers away from the abrasive high-speed belt. I don’t know how many of those slats I sanded over the years, but I suspect it was many thousands. But here’s the interesting thing; I never really got bored with the job. Yes, I did get very tired, very sore and often quite stressed trying to meet deadlines - but never bored. There was no room for boredom. If you did not pay attention to the job, to each slat, you could easily lose the shape and waste the material, or even worse injure yourself quite badly (ever let go of a piece of wood that’s pressed down on a high-speed belt sander?).

Seeking a consistent finish to each and every repetition was the key - getting just the right uniform chamfer on each edge; rounding off the ends so they blended into the main length; the list goes on. You had to stay present to the work, not ‘gap out’, and that was what made it interesting, sometimes even meditative. After a couple of years of this, I started to be quite pleased with the result; but there was always room for improvement!

Taijiquan and Qigong practise is no different. Much of it is spent on the plateau - just doing the same thing again and again and not feeling like you are being rewarded.

The trick is to start to notice that the reward is in doing that thing again and again and again.

It is an important change of perspective. This is even more the case the longer you have been ‘in the business’. When you have been studying and practising for many years, it is very easy to become a ‘legend in your own mind’. This is quite a natural trap to fall into. All of us to some degree have a need to feel that all our efforts have come to something, and that as a consequence of those efforts we are a more accomplished and empowered human being. Just thinking that we are capable of doing something complex (‘the legend’) does not mean we can actually do it. Ignoring the opportunity to open up and be honest about where we are in our journey tends to leave us on the plateau, often without realising it.

We have to accept change, because if we don’t we can once again plateau in our practise. Our resistance to change and the acceptance that change is often a “2 steps forward, 1 step back” process is rooted in the natural condition of homeostasis. This is the body’s (and society’s) natural instinct to constantly readjust to keep the



Stay present and do not be distracted.

status quo so that no debilitating change occurs. To quote George Leonard, “the problem is that homeostasis works to keep things the way they are, even though they are not very good”. If we want to improve at something, though, we have to change, and this is precisely when homeostasis kicks in and a natural resistance to that change takes place. So what can we do about that?

Here are some of my thoughts on how to make the most of the practise plateau when it next presents itself:

Think about what you want to do, what you need to do, what you actually can do. Visualising your practise is a valid way to create the intent to

practise, and prepare for change. Write it down if it helps clarify your intentions - you then also have a checklist to work with.

- Make time to do it, but don't make time a burden. You don't have to practise for hours at a time, but you do have to practise. Little-and-often is much better than too-much-then-nothing-at-all.
- Create a space that you can be comfortable in, that minimises distractions, and allows you to bring about the changes to your routine that are needed to make progress. Create some routines, like making your favourite tea, to help zone you into the session and anticipate it with pleasure.
- Make changes to your techniques gradual so you don't shock your system into resisting.
- Don't compromise on the details. Stay present to the task you have set yourself and try not to base it on achieving something you know (deep down inside) you are not ready for.
- Whenever possible, take advantage of your community connections to discuss the problems you are having e.g. discussions with like-minded colleagues face-to-face or online.
- Work hard at it with an open heart - don't let your mind return you to complacency and stagnation; effort is not a dirty word.

Above all: Breathe; Stay Calm; Find Centre and the way to connect with your Qi. Let the Taiji process begin, and stay with it; the practise will surely look after itself.

Patrick Foley began his exploration of taijiquan in the late 1980's, after 4 years of judo, jujitsu and karate training. His main focus was on Wu style and Daoist neigong practises, and he started teaching these in 2004, under the name of Longwater Tai Chi. He began his Yang curriculum training with Master Sam Masich in 2010, and was accepted as an indoor student in 2019. He is also a Senior Instructor in the TCUGB.