

The Journey To Becoming A Teacher

My response to the question on that occasion was the same as it has always been: the time required will be different for each individual. Some people may acquire large amounts of knowledge and skill in the art over many years, but may never gain the ability to pass it on. Others can find themselves teaching in a comparatively short period of time.

My own initiation as a teacher was far from one of choice. I had joined an adult education class at a local school and was leaning Taiji. It was about five weeks into the course and my fellow students and I were waiting patiently for the teacher to arrive.

After about twenty minutes the school secretary came into the hall. She explained to the class that the teacher was unable to attend that night. Then she asked who David was. I stepped forward and said it was me. She then went on to explain that Nigel - I think it only fair to mention his name! - had requested her to ask if I could take the class. The term "baptism by fire" came immediately to mind!

I could not say anything and my legs started to buckle. I think they call it panic! After what seemed like an eternity I managed to get out the word "Yes". Several questions racing through my brain, the first being "what have I ever done to Nigel?" The next being how do I start and will the class actually follow me?

Well I did what Nigel did or what little I could remember. I was feeling a multitude of emotions the most prominent being embarrassment as I stuttered through the lesson.

I have had to stand at the front of many classes since that night and I still feel uncomfortable with the responsibilities of giving the student something useful to take away, value for money and a enjoyable few hours.

Just recently I have been present at a couple of new classes where fellow instructors have had to face a fresh batch of students. During these classes I observed the different ways in which my very experienced colleagues dealt with the pressure. One, who is particularly versed in Taiji history, was able to control the situation by talking. The other demonstrated what the students would be learning in the lessons. Both sticking to what they felt secure with.

Money can sometimes be the motivation for a person to start teaching, treating Taiji as a commodity to be marketed. I am sure that if you worked at it hard enough a reasonable return could be had for your efforts, though I personally do not know anyone who has made a real killing financially when teaching.

Is the process of passing on knowledge more important than financial reward? I personally have continued as I started and have never taken any payment for teaching.

Now in saying this I am not suggesting that everyone else should follow in my foot steps. I just feel more comfortable teaching in this way and hope that it does not bear any reflection on the standard of the instruction I give!

During each class I discover something new about the leaning process. Tricks of the trade you might say. Things like not talking too much so that the class are able to focus on what they are doing rather than on you. Always having a basic exercise up your sleeve for the moment when you have to gather your thoughts. This also is beneficial for the students as their attention begins to waiver. Methods like this allow for a more comfortable environment for both teacher and student.

There are many problems associated with teaching. One that I find the most difficult to contend with is gaining the trust of the class.

Now some teachers are lucky in this area as their reputation precedes them. Others of us will have to try build a trusting relationship up with the students. Over the years I would have hoped to have developed a sure fire way to get the class eating out of my hand. No chance. Every class is different; some require you to show your skill and impress them. Others want you to give them something I suppose so they can impress you. I have discovered no magic fix to deal with this problem, only a little experience in assessing the needs of a class. These needs come in varying shapes and sizes. Some will need a bright, warm place to train; others may need a slightly more personal type of tuition. You must make yourself aware of these requirements while not losing sight of your lesson goals.

I remember when one of my senior colleagues left me in charge of his class while he was out of the country, one young lady was struggling to pick up what was being taught. I sat down and wrote out the moves of the form as I spoke them in the class. It was a painstaking process but a worthwhile one as she stuck at learning Taiji becoming an excellent instructor in her own right and a good friend.

You cannot measure the satisfaction and pleasure this can bring. It only happens once in a while, but it justifies the effort. However, in saying this you must avoid the danger of focusing on one student's needs and forgetting the rest of the class.

You sometimes get certain students who try to hijack the class and manipulate it for their own needs. In keeping everyone happy you will sometimes have to fall short of teaching a complete lesson in case you alienate some of the class.

I have recently been attending a course to gain a NVQ qualification in adult education. One of the things they advocate is having a lesson plan. Sometimes I will spend all day considering what to teach at the class that night only to find that on arrival the mix of student does not lend itself to what I wanted to teach and then I have to come up with something totally different to suit.

Finally I would like to offer any of you budding teachers out there one last word of advice. Never forget your experiences as a student in the early days of your training because you'll probably find your hopes and fears at that time reflected in your students today.

by David Spencer