

Introduction: Tai Chi Quan is a Chinese martial art that can trace back to 12<sup>th</sup> century. It is practiced in s-l-o-w circular movements. Because of its health benefits, many older people exercise Tai Chi everyday in public parks in China. Today Tom is going to share with us about his practice of Tai Chi Quan and what it has taught him. This is going to be his second ice-breaker since his joining our club two years ago and finishing Competent Communicator Manual. With his speech, *Slowly, but steadily: Three lessons Tai Chi Quan taught me*, let's welcome Tom Tan, CC!

Slowly, but steadily:  
Three lessons Tai Chi Quan taught me

Spring, 2003, I was in my last semester in high school in China, getting all excited to go to college at Columbia in the United States. Because of SARS, school was closed, and I had a lot of free time. Plus, I weighed more than 200 pounds then. My parents therefore suggested I should learn Tai Chi Quan with a group of middle-aged and older people at a park (my folks were so wise that they did not even recommend more fast-moving exercises like soccer. That would kill me.). The group warmly welcomed me probably because I was the youngest, and a bit chubby, and going to study at a famous American university. I may promote Tai Chi Quan, this aspect of Chinese culture overseas one day, who knows! (Open posture)

(Slow and low voice) That is the beginning of my experience with Tai Chi Quan. I am extremely fortunate and grateful that the group taught me this splendid culture heritage. It has taught me three important lessons over time, which positively impacted my life.

(Stage left) When I was first learning the Tai Chi Quan regular routine, I asked the teacher many quote on quote “philosophical” questions, such as the differences between our school and other styles of Tai Chi Quan. The teacher smoothly deflected my questions just like the circular movements in Tai Chi. He told me that I should first finish learning the whole 30 minute routine, and then I would be able to understand the nuanced differences in the future. That is the first lesson I learnt: we should focus on closely following the form when starting to learn. As a beginner, we may be discombobulated, distracted, and discouraged by too much information about the meaning behind the form. This lesson later on rescued me in graduate school. The abstract definitions and theorems in a game theory class seriously challenged me. I just cannot figure out what other people think about what I think of what they think. Instead of giving up, I survived by memorizing the theorems verbatim (i.e., learning the form). With time, the knowledge and understanding started to sink in. Unless we are naturally gifted, we should focus on closely following the form first and let the time fill in the understanding later on.

(Stage center) (Transition) After learning the form, we may run the risk of rushing through the practice because we know where we are going. I clearly remember I would often outpace my teacher when doing the routine. “How come he is so slow!” I would often think in my head. Instead, the teacher taught me to use my mind to lead my body (slow tempo). In other words, we should deliberately s-l-o-w-d-o-w-n. When slowing down, we can feel relaxed, tranquil and inspired. Isn't it true many “eureka”s and creative ideas appeared in the bathroom? However, slowing down does not mean slouching or idling. Rather, we should remain focused. For one,

one would lose balance in the movements if slouching. For two, distracting thoughts would creep in. Trust me, I am still working on this deliberate slowing down. That means, when I practice Tai Chi Quan alone on Katy Trail, I should not be distracted by good-looking people OR animals passing by.

(Stage right) The last lesson Tai Chi Quan taught me is discipline. No matter what happens, we should persistently practice it. The group I learnt Tai Chi Quan from would practice together in the park every day at 6:30 am, rain or shine. I am not there yet, but I aspire to be more disciplined. In the past year and half, I have been practicing at least once a week on Katy Trail. Within this period of time, Tai Chi Quan accompanied me in experiencing the stress and the joy of preparing for my tenure evaluation AND writing Toastmasters speeches (Humor). During the practice, I see the trees (soft voice) changing colors from fresh green to dull yellow to eventually leafless. (Hand gesture, cupping the ears) I hear the occasional blustering wind and the roaring of airplanes. (Take a breath) I smell the freshly cut grass and sometimes my own sage and sea salt cologne. After the practice, I feel relaxed and refreshed. These feelings, observations and experiences (<< >>) make me enjoy returning to my usual Tai Chi spot every week. I slowly but steadily start to realize (pause) every day is a good day. (pause)

(Stage center, again) These three lessons are of course not unique to Tai Chi Quan. I hope we can all apply these lessons at Toastmasters. Similar to practicing Tai Chi Quan, we will first learn the form or the techniques of public speaking. Just follow and do it. In addition, we will remain relaxed but focused when delivering our speeches. Furthermore, we will keep writing, speaking, listening to and improving from the feedback, regardless of life events. Unlike my practicing Tai Chi Quan alone, we are doing it t-o-g-e-t-h-e-r. Slowly but steadily we will become masters of toasts.