



Tai Chi in the Dark

For 17 years they have been meeting once a week for a lesson in the art of Tai Chi Chuan. The teacher Assi Ben-Porat has already managed to teach [Ilan Amit](#) a wide range of exercises including Chi Kung, Tai Chi Form, Sword form, partner work (Joining Hands) and more. The fact that Amit is blind they forgot long ago. In a joint interview they told me about the mutual learning process they went through, about the love of movement and about freedom within limitations.

By Illy Berr.

Photography: Osnat Krasnansky



Heel touches heel, the body stands comfortably, relaxed between heaven and earth. The eyes are closed, legs and hands are motionless. Then, a story begins to unfold. The eyelids lift and the body slowly begins to move in space. One movement ends and dissolves into the next one. The weight of the body shifts from the back leg to the front leg; the hands are as if negotiating with an imaginary opponent. The sequence of the art of Tai Chi Chuan form contains within itself the story of the human kind, any human being, who moves and act in the world, searching the support of the earth and the inspiration that lift the spirit up to the sky. The practitioner turns to the left and to the right. Squatting and rising. Receiving and giving. In the end he returns to the same quiet stance. Heel touches heel, and the body is once again motionless and serene. The eyes are closed for one more moment and then we are back to the daily turmoil.

The Chinese art of movement – the Tai Chi Chuan – has long ceased to be categorized Eastern exotica. Increasingly more and more people start their mornings or close their days practicing the sequence of slow movements, and there is nothing out of the ordinary in it. I assume that whoever finds the Tai Chi close to his heart could not ask for more. Its practice has become an accepted routine; another thing people simply do as part of their daily lives. Similarly, the meeting between Ilan Amit and the Tai Chi teacher, Assi Ben-Porat, has become a routine of studying and practicing for both of them. For 17 years Amit comes for a weekly lesson, one on one with Ben-Porat. The only difference from any other Tai Chi lesson is the fact that Amit does not see.



Beyond Limitation.

In his late forties Amit gradually lost his eyesight until he finally became totally blind. Later, through a relative, he contacted Ben-Porat in order to find out if he could teach him Tai Chi. At that time the whole subject was in its infancy in Israel, not to mention the experience of teaching a sightless person a complex set of movement that even someone with perfect eyesight may find difficult to learn.

"When Ilan approached me I was 35 years old, still a relatively young teacher," Ben-Porat recalled. "I asked to think about it before giving him an answer. I'd had no previous experience with a blind student but I finally decided that I would try and so we started."

I should mention that I have been a student of Assi Ben-Porat for many years, and, by chance, participate in an "inner work" group where Ilan Amit is one of the teachers. Relatively recently I heard about their working relationship, but was not really surprised that it was not publicly known. The possibility arose to tell about their work together in this magazine, not as a dramatic story of impossible achievement reached through hard work but mainly to show the opposite: that even a limitation such as blindness does not necessarily prevent practicing a complex movement.

How was a system of teaching for a student that does not see developed?

Ben-Porat: "The searching process of how took a long time until teaching became what it is today. I think that only my learning process as a teacher for this particular work took at least 3 years. After a year of working with Ilan, when I had relaxed in the unfamiliar situation, I understood that it is actually like teaching anybody else. When I reached that state I could comfortably begin to find out what was right and what was not right to do in the lessons. In my

ordinary classes I leave a lot of space for the process of learning to happen. A common language for understanding the movement has developed between Ilan and me. Nowadays there can be lessons during which I hardly speak, and I think this is because his practice and our common work are well established."

Amit: "The truth is that I do not see a lot of change in our way of studying. From the beginning Assi described the movements in a few words, I did them while he was describing them and then he would correct me. What's more, he broke the movement into stages and very small components. He worked with me on parts of the movement and then helped me to put them together.

Nevertheless, it was clear to me that there are aspects in Tai Chi that are very difficult to learn in this way. Up till today there are Tai chi elements that I do not do exactly like seeing practitioners. For example, it takes a long time until the broken movement becomes a flowing movement, but I think that's largely true with seeing people as well."

During Amit's weekly lesson, which I joined for the purposes of this article, I had the opportunity to observe some of the variety of exercises that he has learnt over the years: Chi Kung exercises, the Form – both the short and the long sequences of movements (it looks like a long solo dance), practicing with sword, work with a partner and practicing a sister art of Tai Chi called Pa Kua (which is a system that emphasizes walking in a circle and movement of circular nature in all directions). It is true that the continuity of Amit's movement differs slightly from that of an ordinary practitioner, and it seems that he has naturally developed a moving style of his own, but still there is not enough in it to reveal the fact that he has never seen the movement with his own eyes, but has constructed it from being externally directed, his sensing of the location of body parts and the power of imagination and visual memory that is in his mind. At some point you forget to be surprised at his sense of location in space, and only as he takes an exact step backwards when the sword reaches too close to the table in the corner of the room, suddenly you wonder - how is it that he is so aware of his direction, of the walls and of his steps inside a relatively confined space?

Ben-Porat: "If I were to blindfold an experienced practitioner and then would ask him to do the Tai Chi form for 20 minutes, it is probable to assume that he would not complete it precisely like Ilan in relationship to his placement in the room".

Amit: "I think that blindness has two sides in connection with Tai Chi. On the one hand, because I do not have the visual input that gives a person a strong emphasis on the world in front of him and a certain neglect of the space behind him, I feel that my awareness of the space in front and behind is more balanced. On the other hand, there are things that eyesight greatly helps, like keeping your sense of balance, for example. I feel that I am less stable than what I would like it to be. But I've learnt that even on this aspect I can work and improve."

Ben-Porat: "Of course, blindness is a limitation, but after many years of teaching as well as from experiences in my life, I think that every human being maybe blind or limited in one

aspect of life or another. If I were asked about the essence of the working experience with Ilan, I would sum it up by saying that his limitation is not the main issue. If I turn it into an issue, only then will it become a problem."

Because you could see in the past, do you imagine the movement visually?

Amit: "Yes. Generally I still have a visual world that is not precisely compatible to what other people see externally, but I use a visual imagination. I assume that for a man who was born blind, it may be slightly harder to study because he does not have the capacity to see the movement in his mind's eye and he relies only on an inner sensing of the location of the body parts."

The Body and the Being.

Ilan Amit has a P.H.D in science; his main occupation for many years. He was also one of the first Israelis to tread the trail forged by the famous teacher G.A Gurdjieff who termed it the `Fourth Way`, and 2 years ago his book "Gurdjieff and Inner Work" was published by Mapa publishing house. Assi Ben-Porat, who studied Tai Chi in London and started to teach in Israel around the mid-eighties, privately published a translation of the classic literature of Tai Chi in a book "The essence of Tai Chi Chuan – The Literary Tradition", and has also painted dozens of art works expressing the spirit of the movement. For both of them the inner dimension of the practice takes a central place, so we continued our conversation directing it to the hidden movement that lies underneath the outward movement of the physical body.

Do you think that Tai Chi can be defined as one of the more advanced arts of developing and refining listening ability?

Ben-Porat: "Yes, definitely yes. To my mind, Tai Chi is going now through stages of developments and evolution that may be even beyond the original intention of the masters who created it.

One of its growing directions is really the deepening in the quality of listening to what is "inside" and to what is "outside."

Is it possible that the lack of visual input increases this experience of listening for the blind practitioner?

Ben-Porat: "We know from practicing with closed eyes the quality of listening immediately changes, but the aim is to mainly sharpen the fact that it is possible to sense things through every cell in the body. It has to do with developing peripheral attention. Also, in relationship to the eyes, it is interestingly said in Tai Chi, that you need to learn observe the world through them without being captivated by their almost dictatorial control of our attention.

We would like to enable our attention to disengage from too close a contact with one of the senses and to be able to receive input from all the senses and all directions. You could say

that the capacity to direct our attention becomes as if another active organ that is independent of the senses."

What about the connection between physical movement to the changes in the psyche and the conscious states?

Amit: "I knew someone who had studied Judo in Japan and had reached a very high level in his practice. At the same time he also studied Zen. His Zen master once told him: `The problem with you Western people is that you do not feel comfortable with your body`. I think that this is a basic thing and very true. I remember very well an instance when I entered a coffee shop in Paris and there in the middle sat an African man. You could immediately see that he feels comfortable with his body. Therefore he occupied a larger space than the physical space that his body actually occupied. This issue of feeling good with your body should be what motivates you to do things like Tai Chi, Feldenkriize, Gurdjieff's movement or whatever. Not to attain dazzling abilities, but to arrive at the state where to be in your body will turn into an integral part of your being.

By the way, the word `body` is not correct. The physical body is a metaphor. Our sensual world is much closer to the existence of the human being than the metaphor of a body which we can see.

When we say `body` we immediately think about some object, a certain object that is called `the body`. But actually there is no such thing. This is, in fact, our existence in the world, which has all kind of dimensions, and one of them is being sensual".

Movement for Its Own Sake

In this sense Tai Chi is presented as a way for inner development rather than a functional Martial Art.

Amit: "I would like to say something concerning all Martial Arts. In whatever people do in a very focused way, if they devote themselves to this thing totally, they can attain abilities that seem unreasonable or impossible for the ordinary person.

What has happened in these arts is that the persons that led them were of the totally devoted kind. Therefore, the Martial Arts are full of legends about people who reached in Tai Chi the ability to hurt you at a certain point so you would be sick for many months. In the more aggressive arts there are stories about the ability to bounce an opponent far, far away, to kill you in one touch etc... All these stories have made a great impression on people, but it seems to me that, to a certain degree, they may harm the essential issue; you are paying a price for pooling all your attention and reaching extreme abilities in a very specific and narrow field. The same problematic process can happen with music practice when musicians play 10 or more hours a day, or in any other field. In my opinion, a person does not achieve anything

Regarding you, did not your turning to this practice originate, among other things, also from the will to overcome your limitation in order to succeed at executing complex movements that are hard enough to do even for a person with eyesight?

Amit: "I think that I somehow simply love movement. My way of life dictates my sitting most of the day in the office or opposite the computer. Since I lost my sight my freedom of movement has become even more limited. In the past I used to run a lot, was very physically active, and nowadays, I cannot go out by myself for an hour to take a walk in the city streets in the evenings.

I have this love of movement in me, and exercising the Tai Chi movements is something that I simply feel good doing. In my opinion, movement and body exercising should occupy, at least, fifty percent of our lives. Things such as Tai Chi and dance are provide this balance."

Assi, this is a question that has always been returned to at some stage: Why should we practice?

Ben-Porat: "In order to feel good, to stimulate our blood flow, to open the meridians and to raise our spirits. The human body needs to move, and I very much agree here with Ilan. I am personally in love with Tai Chi, in this particular kind of movement."

Amit: "I think that those qualities that emerge from physical exercising are special not only in relation to Tai Chi. Many years ago, I knew Moshe Feldenkrize personally and I took lessons with him in a group situation. In the movement classes that he conducted, he introduced and increased spatial sense of the world and thereby enabled and increased the psychic sense of the world. This sensation lasted a day or two after the lesson and then it would subside. It is clear that this is the same kind of inner sensation that is created by Tai Chi, with the difference that in working with Feldenkrize there was a certain dependency on him as a teacher, while in Tai Chi it depends on you as a practitioner".

Ben-Porat: "I think this point is very important. You can wake up in the morning, take a beginning stance, focus your attention on the top of your head, and watch your breathing, do a couple of movements and then something opens up. Tai Chi really aims at the practitioner being independent of an external cause".

Assi, how do you understand the connection between the abstract dimension of consciousness and the physical practice?

Ben-Porat: "In the first postures and movements of the Tai Chi Form there is already a transition from the primary transcendent state (The source of all things, which is called Wu Chi), into the state that is called Tai Chi – the appearance of the Yin and the Yang, the plus and the minus. After that the Form of Tai Chi continues into the story of life, and the last movement is back to the source, to a state with no opposites, with no dualism. It may be possible to put in words the essence of practice, that in certain moments we are able to observe the dualistic reality from a unified place. It is not an everlasting state, but it is the direction."

Amit: "What Assi describes is a picture of life in general. Life is a biography, but we are not only that biography. There is something in us which is before and after our biography, and from the aspect of that something, our biography is not different from a dream. This thing is there all the time. In relation to this aspect I must say that I have a problem with the perception of the Chi as it is sometimes presented in Eastern philosophies. I think that the Chi is mistakenly presented as a private thing. My Chi is here, and yours is there, mine is this way and yours is that way..."

Ben-Porat: "The basic idea is that everything, all phenomenon, is in fact different levels of density of Chi. You are in contact with the Chi from the moment that you enter the world and you have the ability to sense it. Not to feel it, but to sense it. Even a feeling is a sensation in a way. For me this is the key for understanding the essence of the Chi."

Amit: "It is really a paradoxical thing. It would not be untrue to say that there is a focused aspect to the Chi. However, the Chi is totally impersonal. Our existence is changing all the time and it has both a personal side and a unified side. Life is like a negotiation between wholeness and separation."

