



Tai Ji: The Art of Standing Still, By Ans Hoofst

I'm learning *tai ji* the Chinese way: in the park. Nearly every morning, work permitting, I go to my patient but strict teacher. Master Liu is a local celebrity with his own website; he is 75 years old and has been in this park for 53 years now. He has taught *tai ji* and "push hands/*tui shou*" to generations of Shanghainese, so I thought: It looks easy and I can do this too!

On my first day I'm ready to go: warmed up, in my jogging suit. OK, says Master Liu, go and stand over there. Stand? What do you mean, stand? Well, yes, just stand. I stand and he looks at me from all angles. Hmm, no, he says, not good. He starts to correct my posture: shoulders like this, back like that, bend the knees, head straight, balance to the front, breathe with your belly, empty your mind. And he leaves me on my own – 10 minutes – 20 minutes – 30 minutes. Every now and then he comes back to correct something again, because I cannot manage to stay like that. My legs start to shake. Can I keep this up? Is this normal? Relax, he says. Don't think of anything else but your breathing. Try to close your eyes, this is standing meditation. Excuse me, close my eyes?

Just to be clear: this is a Chinese park. All around me people are walking around while they swing their arms, they clap their hands, they scream, they sing. They are dancing with fans, with swords, and with each other. This I understand. But they are also hugging trees. They are hitting trees. There are two people who scream at trees (seems to be good for regulating your internal energy, but they mainly irregulate my concentration). They walk backwards (also very healthy and good for clear thinking). Close my eyes and think of nothing in this madhouse? No way!

How long have I stood there? Fifty minutes. And again the next day. And the day after. Each time Master Liu comes to correct my posture and tells me really, I should breathe with my belly. Every now and then he shakes me up totally and massages some muscles that hurt. Passers-by stop to stare at me with their mouth open. When a tree-screamer comes too close I cannot stop laughing. Am I crazy to continue like this? What about those beautiful moves that I dreamt about? Perhaps my teacher doesn't want foreigners? Is this a hazing ritual? A selection test? What kind of fool goes on standing like this?

But, I did go on. And, after two weeks of standing, something happened. Instead of all the noise around me I heard the birds sing, I felt the sun on my skin and I started to smile. It was wonderful, I wanted to stand much longer! Right at that moment Master Liu said: Okay.

Now several months have passed, and my movements are vaguely beginning to look like *tai ji*, but I have to be repeated endlessly until each move is perfect. I asked Master Liu if he will also teach me 'push hands'? Yes sure, you will learn. In another four, five years. But you have to practice every day. And stand a lot.....