

MAKE THE MOST OF CLASS TIME

"I'll do it later, then I'll have more time." "I'll start working on that when things slow down." "I'll begin next week."

How many times do we say things like that? Do things ever slow down? So... start now, when you think of it. Next week you may have out of town visitors.

Talking with some friends about the 'good old days' got me thinking. In the good old days we used to practice 3-5 hours a day, at least 6 days a week. We were crazy and very lucky. Practice and training was all we wanted to do and fortunately, we had the time to do it. Whatever skill I have now is due to the intensity of that training period. During this time we worked very hard on the basics, over and over again. From all that practice, some of those principles are a part of me now so I don't have to think about them, I'm still refining some and working on others that I still don't have yet. At that time I had friends around me with similar interests so I had support and group motivation for practicing, studying and analyzing. In addition to a love of wushu.

Class time is your dedicated time. During this time you shouldn't be concerned with matters outside of class. It's time to practice, study, learn and set a foundation that will support the practice you do on your own. Some of you are just learning the beginning forms and movements. Others are more advanced and get instruction later in the classes. When you are on your own during class make the most of this time. Take advantage while you can. Use the class time as a retreat from daily activities and life. A distraction for a while.

Aside from practicing the new movements and forms, learn to focus. Practice what you are working on. Work on the forms you already know with as much concentration and intent as you can muster. Relax as much as possible, then begin to move. Don't just do the forms or move through the set mindlessly. Be serious. You have the time now, the proper atmosphere, the space and the support of others. You can socialize before or after class, study together and focus during class.

Advanced students can always practice the solo forms at home but the partner applications, pushing hands, relaxation partner drills, or *sanshou* you can't. Take advantage of the other members in the class for practice. The more you practice these the better your inner skill will develop. Also, the more people you practice with the greater your skill potential. At home there usually isn't room to practice the sword or other weapons, use class time for these. Don't just go through the sets or movements. Study, research, mindfully, practice the movements, form and transitions. Practice isn't training, try to develop an attitude of training in class or during class time. Now you have the opportunity, later you may not. Don't be satisfied with merely knowing the forms or movements.

You may decide to come on nights when another class is in session just to be around the atmosphere of training. This is fine, even though the class may be working on something else the intensity is there, the support for practice is there.

With correct mindful practice skill takes care of itself. It accumulates like interest in the bank.

THE PA KUA THREE LEVELS

Pa Kua is divided into three levels or stages of advancement that are taught as you advance through the system. These can refer to many aspects of the art. These levels can also refer to parts of the system or various forms, they may also be used to describe the intensity of practice or levels of practice. They can refer to learning the movements, working the body, *chi kung*, or applications.

These levels are: Set, Fluid, and Change. As far as a specific form; the set level is working as a beginner, learning the movements step by step, clearly segmented. After this is done the next level naturally follows working on the form and movements to be connected and fluid. This works on the flow of the body mind and muscles whereas the first stage works on body structure and accuracy. The final stage is change, the forms are integrated into the body muscle memory and everything is controlled by the mind. You move spontaneously in any direction with any change, mixing, and combining them, in a specific form the tempo, speed, and power execution may change and emerge spontaneously.

Normally in the course of studying Pa Kua these were stages you proceeded through over years. This is one reason for the differences between certain teachers of the same style teaching very differently or looking very different. Since life is much more hectic, and the arts are more for exercise and self-defense instead of fighting the first two stages are usually taught quicker. The Change level is basically personal growth and evolves by itself.

As you first learn a new change or movement we naturally work on the set stage. I do this with most new movements except perhaps for advanced students. But even for beginners there are some movements I will emphasize the moving stage. This stage helps to develop *chi kung*, mobility, smoothness and self-defense skills. The figure 8, shooting palm walk is to develop this level of continuous movements. The serpentine step is also to force you to develop a quicker mind and body action and a moving center. Here you are challenged to change your focus and concentration each half circle, weaving back and forth. It develops a quicker mind, body, and balance.

The Change stage we try to work on with the partner circling, changing, and applications. We also start mixing the various changes and doing them faster so the mind can't think it has to be alert.

Another way of looking at these levels are in your execution of the various changes and walking. From high to medium to low stances. Beginners circle high since their legs aren't strong or flexible enough to work harder. As you become more experienced, stronger and skilled your walking and stances should be lower. Eventually circling with your thighs parallel with the ground! This is also a progression you should use during class and practice time. Start out high and easy for the first 15 minutes (or in the morning) then gradually get lower and lower as class or practice continues. If you don't push yourself further your Pa Kua won't amount to much. Pushing yourself harder doesn't mean going beyond your natural reach or circle of strength. It just means you should 'feel' the muscles working slightly. *Use class time to work your hardest.* As far as the postures are concerned we can look at the different systems in order to see what stage it was passed on or the emphasis of that particular system. The Shang Tung style isn't very low or strenuous. So chances are the instructor this came from was either very old or didn't go far in the system, it could also work primarily on fighting for a big person.

Each system I've learned can be traced back to Cheng Ting Hua either 2 or 3 generations ago. Though similar, each has a different degree of difficulty. Each style is unique, though coming from one grand master. As you progress through the club, keep what you find makes sense to you. The only reason to keep them all is if you decide to teach. Together they all give a better view and perspective of the entire Pa Kua system.