

Working with our Habit Energies
28th International T'ai Chi Chih Teacher's Conference
August 1-4, 2013
St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota

Marie Dotts

I am sharing this topic with you because as long as I can remember it has been a call in my heart. This call is what led me to the practice of T'ai Chi Chih. It has also led me to the Diamond Approach which is an inner work path grounded in psychology and self-awareness and dedicated to the discovery and development of Essence. Its originator is A. H. Almaas. I am deeply grateful for both of these practices in my life and grateful to share with you some of what I have learned so far on this journey.

I would like to begin by sharing what Justin has to say about habit energies. From Spiritual Odyssey, Out of Bondage, Justin writes:

"We develop habit energies during our lifetime ("Vashanas" in Sanskrit), and these not only motivate us in our lives but also make Karma for the future. We believe we are perfectly free in our decisions and our movements, but, if we study ourselves closely and impartially we will find that we follow certain patterns, sometimes even asking ourselves why we made a particular mistake all over again...

By closely studying ourselves, we may be able to determine our past, or even past lives if we believe them. An orange tree does not grow apples. The patterns grow steadily stronger and they lead us in a direction we may not really want to go....

Ultimately the aim is to go back the way we came and undo the causes, the mental modifications which lead to the Vashanas, which become Samskaras, the tendencies that last through many lifetimes...

If we are not content with our lives, we might take a look in the direction of these habit patterns. If you really want to you can change the direction in which you are heading."

Justin says the aim is to go back the way we came. This is because when we are born we ARE our True Nature, our Essence but without awareness. Essence is that within us that is unconditioned. We can only know Essence by being Essence. It is not our thoughts, our emotions, or our body. It is the very substance of our existence. It is the flow of our aliveness. This flow can manifest in our lives as aspects or qualities like the green of compassion, the white of will, the black of peace, the red of strength, and the yellow of joy. The amazing richness of Essence is that there is an essential aspect or quality for every human condition or

situation. When our habit energies are out of the way Essence flows and manifests whatever is required in any moment. If life calls for clarity, that arises, compassion, that arises, strength, that arises. This is the state Justin refers to when he says, “No one is doing T’ai Chi Chih; T’ai Chi Chih is doing T’ai Chi Chih.

Losing contact with our Essential nature on our journey to awareness is for the most part universal. Because of the nature of the journey and because of certain interactions with our environment and certain difficulties we encounter we get cut off from our Essence one Aspect at a time. As each Aspect is “lost,” we are left with a hole accompanied by a feeling of incompleteness and deep lack. We have not really lost it though, we cannot lose the Essence of Who we Are, we have just lost contact with it. As more and more of these holes result from the loss of Essential Aspects, the balance becomes tipped toward a general sense of emptiness and deficiency. This inner state of deficient emptiness can feel like a sense of being valueless, worthless, small and weak, helpless, impotent, inadequate, ineffective, and suspended without support. This is the very center and core of our personality or habit energies.

The deficient emptiness was far too painful to tolerate, and triggered the fear that one would not survive this loss. A layer of tension and constriction formed around any given hole to prevent one from feeling this terror. The personality in an attempt to cope with this life-threatening fear began to fill the hole with false feelings, self-images, beliefs about oneself and others, and strategies for dealing with the loss. Our habit energies are nothing more than these fillers or knots. We feel them as tensions in our bodies that block our Vital force.

For example if one loses contact with the Essential Aspect of Value. The hole can be experienced as a deep sense of inferiority or lack of self-esteem. The personality will then try to fill the hole from the outside and may try to use approval and praise from others to fill the hole with fake value. The personality always wants what Essence is but sees it as outside and always in a distorted way. The personality could also defend from feeling the pain of the hole by creating a sense of superiority. All these are compensations for the loss of contact with Real Value. But, Real Value is a state of Being. There is nothing we can do to receive Value. Our very existence and Essence is Value. Another example, is when people first come to T’ai Chi Chih we see how they may first try to muscle their way through the movements. Their personalities have a habit of using false strength as a way to compensate for the loss of contact with Real Strength.

We are not usually aware of the holes and habit energies. They lie in our unconscious. We are usually aware of the desires and attachments such as praise, approval, control, money and possessions, success, love, beauty, or a certain experience. We are also aware of their corresponding emotions such as sadness, hurt, jealousy, anger, hatred, and fear.

Justin often spoke about the “Reciprocal Character of Mind and Chi.” From Spiritual Odyssey, page 26, Justin writes, “For each frame of mind there is a corresponding Chi. Our thinking cultures our Vital Force. Thus we can influence what we are and what we become by what we think. But similarly, what we think is greatly conditioned by the Chi, the Vital force.”

We know that the circulating and balancing of Chi through our T'ai Chi Chih practice has a great effect on our habit energies. This is evidenced by the countless letters Justin has received stating “T'ai Chi Chih has changed my life.” What I would like to do now is deepen into the principles of T'ai Chi Chih and share how they have been helpful to me in working directly with my habit energies in life. Working with my habit energies using the principles of T'ai Chi Chih has really deepened my experience and relationship with the principles in my T'ai Chi Chih practice.

I would like to start with the principle focusing in the soles of the feet. Our habit energies live in our bodies and our life will reflect them until we wake up to them. Our first task then in working with our habit energies is to wake up to them. If we are not awake to them our habit energies will take us right out of the moment, out of our bodies and into our unconscious habits and patterns. But, we are a Beingness, a flowing Presence, that can only be felt when we are in our bodies and in the present moment. It is our connection to this Presence that can help us wake up to a habit energy in our life or in our practice. When we are focusing in the soles of the feet in our practice we are cultivating Presence. As our connection to Presence deepens we are also developing a deeper sensitivity to what is actually happening in our bodies, as well as a deeper sensitivity to our emotions and our thoughts as they arise in the present moment. This deeper sensitivity is what really helps us wake up. Before a habit energy takes over there is often a physical sensation alerting us, like a flickering irritation, a tightening of the jaw, a knot in stomach, or a contraction around the heart. But, the habits of the personality are very strong and so without a practice of staying awake we easily fall prey to our unconscious patterns. It is the focusing in the soles of the feet and the cultivation of Presence in every moment of our lives that can help us break free.

I love the story from Justin about a time he was staying at a Hotel in Los Angeles. It is in the booklet, The Spiritual Life, page 24. I would like to share it with you now. “I’m an early riser, so I got up early the first morning, walked by the desk and saw a very interesting sign which said, “Habit is the enemy of old age.” I thought, “Well, well, that’s really nice.” So I went in the dining room and I sat down at a table; but I was there very early and I was the first one in the dining room which seated about 150 people. And I was just about to eat my breakfast when an older lady came in and stood next to me. I looked at her and said, “Won’t you join me?” She said, “You’re sitting in my chair.” I looked at the chair. I didn’t see any name on the chair. I said, “Be my guest.” I couldn’t believe it. This woman couldn’t eat her breakfast unless she ate

it in that one chair. Now, as she walked out, she passed the sign saying, “Habit is the enemy of old age.” We tend to be pulled along by these habits, and these build up what are called tendencies which may pass through many lives.” I wonder what feeling was arising in the woman in this story right before she acted out her habit energy. Being awake to that feeling and not being pulled is the key to living a life of Essence.

The principles of alignment and shifting the weight really support me in resisting this tendency to be pulled along by my habits. Our true center is a Stillness arising out of the fullness and completeness of Essence. Our habit energies are anything but stillness. They are a constant activity and agitation, pulling us out of our bodies and what is really happening in our experience to avoid feeling the pain of the personality’s incompleteness and deficiency. Our alignment with our still center, aligns us with the Truth of Who we Are, Essence. If we really believed that the very center and core of us, is this feeling of deficient emptiness, it would be almost impossible for the mind to disengage from our habit energies. Our T’ai Chi Chih practice strengthens our alignment with our true center and thus our ability to disengage. In my own practice I notice that when I lose my center I am also pulled out of alignment. I need to keep a constant awareness of my center as I shift the weight to maintain alignment and so it is with life.

Staying in alignment with my center also connects me with the inner strength and inner support needed to really be with the feeling and truth of my experience. This alignment is what allows me to stay with any feeling as it is arising in my body versus unconsciously expressing the feeling (like when you lash out in anger) or repressing the feeling.

I would like to address a habit energy we all have that really restricts our Life Force and blocks our awareness of the actual feelings arising in our bodies. It is the internal voice of guilt, shame, and judgment also known as the superego. It’s the voice of our parents and outer authority when we were young and its strategy helped us survive as a child but now blocks us from actualizing our potential. Its job is to restrict our flow and keep us small by maintaining our identification with our habit energies. And it is diligent in this task. To realize how pervasive it is I invite you to close your eyes and recall the beginning of your trip here up to this point. See if you can identify how many judgments you had about your situation, about yourself, and about others. Our superegos not only judge us but can be projected onto others. This judgment is a habit energy. It is imperative that we defend against this voice of judgment. The first step is to become awake and present to the fact that we are under attack. When I am in the midst of an attack I lose touch with my body and the voice usually comes from the outside and to the right. Once you recognize an attack the best way to deal with it is to defend against it using the strength from your Presence in the soles of your feet and your alignment with your center. This way instead of going along with this voice of judgment you are aligning with Essence which

is always a voice of acceptance, love, and compassion. Justin in 20th Century Psalms, pg 25, states, "To be too hard on yourself is to deny the divinity within."

In my T'ai Chi Chih practice what has helped me the most with this is my experience of being completely present to every grain of sand as I shift the weight from one foot to the other. In this shifting of the weight there is a sense of staying with myself no matter what I am moving through without rejection, resistance or judgment. As we become free from the voice of judgment and more open and allowing to whatever is arising in us, life truly becomes the joy of simply Being.

Our habit energies are a hardness or a barrier that prevent us from feeling our feelings that we were really too young to tolerate. To feel them would threaten our very survival. We did not have enough awareness and inner support then. Through T'ai Chi Chih and the principles of movement we are developing a safe place within ourselves and the ability to be soft, vulnerable, transparent, and permeable to all our feelings. Contained in these feelings is our own Life Force. As we work with these feelings they often feel experientially like a part of us that is a child. It is the part of us that was not held, fully allowed, and supported as children. This structure is referred to as the soul child in the Diamond Approach.

This opening and movement of feelings is beautifully expressed in "A Potter's Notes on T'ai Chi Chuan", page 18, "Behaving as if it's a force independent of the practitioner, the sequence draws feelings to the surface that may not be welcome there. Sadness, anger, spiritual pain are inescapable and may be experienced intensely, especially at the beginning. Sometimes it is difficult to continue.

T'ai Chi Chuan is a profound cleanser. The life energy flows through every nook and cranny of both body and soul, flushing out feelings that may have been tucked away in order to avoid. As the sequence progresses these feelings become more and more dilute. They are brought to light, acknowledged, and released."

The principle of softness and continuity shows us how to acknowledge and release these feelings. We block and harden from our experience every time we try to push, pull, direct, control, change or manipulate it. We never leave our experience alone. A story Justin shared in Spiritual Odyssey has really brought this home to me and has been a great visual as I work on keeping my hands off my experience and to soften into whatever feeling is arising

On page 28, Justin shares, "How important is this "softness?" There is a famous story of a student and a T'ai Chi Ch'uan Master that provides the answer. Every day the student came to study with the master and every day, no matter how hard he tried, the Master tersely remarked: "Not soft enough!"

After one disappointing class, the student went home and that night dreamed both of his arms fell off. The next day he did T'ai Chi Ch'uan at his lesson, the Master finally nodded and remarked: "Now *that's* soft!"

The more we let go and soften into our experience, while maintaining a sense of Presence, the more we become disidentified from the habit energy. We do this by giving whatever is arising breath and space. If we allow the feeling, embrace it, feel it fully in its totality, in all its texture, color and vividness we give it space to be itself and reveal its truth. To really know how to be with a feeling one can think about a child before he/she is about to open up a beautifully wrapped present. The child holds the present with curiosity, love, appreciation and joy. If we keep being with our experience with the same sense of curiosity, love, and appreciation we will notice that the knot begins to relax and open. Understanding may then arise of the origin and pattern of the habit energy. Once we clearly see and understand a habit energy its time of running our lives is up.

As we just keep relaxing into ourselves we discover the true power of non-doing. As we keep staying with each feeling as it arises we will ultimately meet with the terror and deep painful emptiness of the hole. As we are with the emptiness it will begin to change into a presence that feels spacious, free, and peaceful. This spaciousness then becomes imbued with the quality of Essence that seemed missing. The very Aspect that our habit energies so desperately tried to get from the outside.

I would like to give an example of this process from my life. In a class I am taking I noticed that whenever certain people spoke up I would contract, shut down and have thoughts of judgment. These were people that could express anger and appeared to me to not worry about what the teachers or other students thought of them. My habit energies center around avoiding rejection at all costs. Any type of rejection literally felt like death. Anger or strong disagreement that might cause a judgment or rejection from another was never an option. I was aware of my soul child feeling a lot of inner resentment and even hatred to people who get to express what she never could. These feelings have never been fully allowed because of the superego's need to maintain an image of a loving person. Being always loving was a strategy of mine to get love. Using the principles of T'ai Chi Chih I was able to sense my body, my contractions, and feelings. I was able to let go of any self-judgments and give breath and space to my anger and hatred. As I allowed them to completely be there in their fullness there was a softening. With this softening a feeling of deep sadness and deep hurt arose. There was awareness that the very center or core of my soul child feels unlovable, tainted. As I stayed with the deep pain I noticed a lightness, an openness and spaciousness. A compassion and love arose for the little girl in me that feels so disconnected from any source of love. I felt how rejected and unloved she feels and how desperate she is to be seen and loved. Instead of being

completely identified with her and acting from that identification there was space and separation. I also noticed more strength and inner support to speak up and express myself in class. I was also able to see the people who spoke up more clearly and without the projections of my habit energies.

Our work with our habit energies and the unfoldment of Essence in our lives flows without effort from our very center. When an emerging aspect is ready to be expressed in our lives True Nature will bring to light for us all our habit energies that block its expression. Inwardly this may feel like emotional pain, physical tensions, and possibly illness. Outwardly it may be expressed as difficulties and conflicts with relationships, job, or just life in general. They are all gifts to be unwrapped. They are the very gifts that help us discover Who and What we are. Our job is to trust Essence completely and not to shy away from any feeling or experience that is moving through us. Remember T'ai Chi Chih is with us, holding and guiding us every step of the way.

Working with your Habit Energies

Presence and waking up to your habit energies

Maintaining Presence in every moment of your day will help you wake up to your habit energies. To help you cultivate Presence keep your focus in the soles of the feet and deepen your sensitivity to what is happening in your body in every moment of your day. Notice any contraction or tension arising at any level of your being. Stay with the sense of this tension in your body. If you are experiencing an emotion or thought, notice what is happening in your body as you are feeling the emotion or thinking the thought. If you lose Presence just gently bring your focus back in the soles of the feet.

Staying with and allowing whatever is arising in your experience

There is a strong pull to act out the patterns of your habit energies. To help you stay with your experience, stay in alignment with your internal center of Stillness versus the personality's center of deficiency and reactivity. Let your constant awareness of your center as you shift the weight in your practice, strengthen and support this alignment.

The voice of guilt, shame, or judgment will block you from really being with your experience. Keep the words of Justin's in your heart, "To be too hard on yourself is to deny the divinity within." Judgment of yourself or others will block your awareness of the actual feelings arising in body. Being completely present to every grain of sand as you shift the weight will support you in accepting and allowing any experience that you are moving through.

Softening into the feeling and the power of non-doing

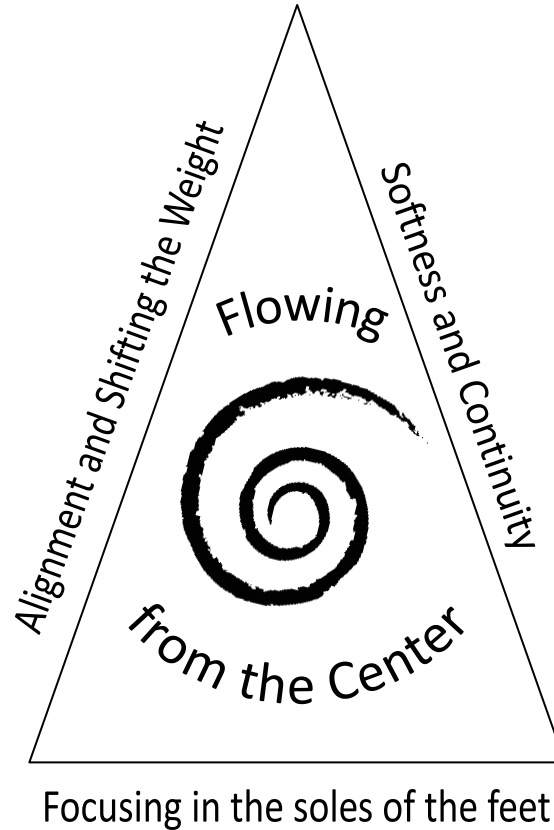
Let go and surrender into the feeling while maintaining a connection to your body and a sense of Presence. Give the feeling as much breath and space as it needs. Watch for any patterns that try to push, pull, direct, control, change, or manipulate your experience. As you are softening and opening into the feeling you can ask yourself some questions about the origin and pattern of the habit energy. Is the feeling familiar to you? When have you felt this before? If you sense the presence of your soul child acknowledge and embrace any feelings arising from him/her. You may feel at some point like you are falling into a hole of deep terror or pain. Keep staying and relaxing into it. Trust Essence completely and do not shy away from any feeling or experience. Through the power of non-doing the hole becomes the very space and emptiness that gives birth to Essence.

Working with your Habit Energies

Staying with and allowing whatever is arising in your experience

There is a strong pull to act out the patterns of your habit energies. To help you stay with your experience, stay in alignment with your internal center of Stillness versus the personality's center of deficiency and reactivity. Let your constant awareness of your center as you shift the weight in your practice, strengthen and support this alignment.

The voice of guilt, shame, or judgment will block you from really being with your experience. Keep the words of Justin's in your heart, "To be too hard on yourself is to deny the divinity within." Judgment of yourself or others will block your awareness of the actual feelings arising in your body. Being completely present to every grain of sand as you shift the weight will support you in accepting and allowing any experience that you are moving through.



Softening into the feeling and the power of non-doing

Let go and surrender into your experience while maintaining a connection to your body and a sense of Presence. Give the feeling as much breath and space as it needs. Watch for any patterns that try to push, pull, direct, control, change, or manipulate your experience. As you are softening and opening into the feeling you can ask yourself some questions about the origin and pattern of the habit energy. Is the feeling familiar to you? When have you felt this before? If you sense the presence of your soul child acknowledge and embrace any feelings arising from him/her. You may feel at some point like you are falling into a hole of deep terror or pain. Keep staying and relaxing into it. Trust Essence completely and do not shy away from any feeling or experience. Through the power of non-doing the hole becomes the very space and emptiness that gives birth to Essence.

Presence and waking up to your habit energies

Maintaining Presence in every moment of your day will help you wake up to your habit energies. To help you cultivate Presence keep your focus in the soles of the feet and deepen your sensitivity to what is happening in your body. Notice any contraction or tension arising at any level of your being. Stay with the sense of this tension in your body. If you are experiencing an emotion or thought, notice what is happening in your body as you are feeling the emotion or thinking the thought. If you lose Presence just gently bring your focus back in the soles of the feet.