

The Wonders of Tai Ski
By Patrice Wooldridge and Maria Gandler

The idea of applying tai chi principles to every aspect of one's life is attractive to almost everyone. It is easy to understand that the more we integrate principle into life, the more we embody our art and enrich all aspects of life.

Yet, for most of us, it's hard to recall and adhere to principle during the stream of busy activity that typically makes up one's day. Since we all need time to have fun – to recreate (re-create) – one might ask, "How can we apply tai chi principles in our recreation?"

One method intimately tied to our school is Hawaiian swimming. Everyone who has taken that course has received a lovely introduction to practicing and embodying principle while swimming.

Many of us enjoy skiing. Nine years ago, the *Götzens Austria Winter Regional Workshop* has offered time to ski in combination with taking tai chi classes. At about the same time each year, Patrick and Patrice Wooldridge have skied in Colorado, many times with other tai chi teachers. Maria and Bas Offerman came up with the idea of calling the time to ski, "Tai Ski," as it seemed clear that applying the principles of tai chi while skiing makes for an even more enjoyable time of being out in the fresh air with like-minded friends and companions.

In tai chi, we evoke the image of swimming in air. In skiing, we find a quality that reminds us of *flying* in air. A deep, rooted connection to the mountain, the expansive view in front, the fresh breeze as one moves down the mountain, the beautiful white snow all around and the need for undistracted mindfulness, all combine to provide one with the feeling of being free from everyday worries and concerns. The more our legs and full body relax, the more we can sense and react to what the earth/mountain/snow provides. We learn to angle the body in proportion to the angle of the hill.

Interestingly, more than 15 years ago *The Tai Chi Press* magazine (Journal of the School of T'ai Chi Chuan) had two articles about tai chi and sports – *Hang Gliding* by J.J. Lamarche and *Ski Chi, Dive into Danger! Learning T'ai Chi on Skis* by Pat Gorman. When Pat was asked 23 years later about that article, she shared that skiing is one of the things she misses the most (due to health issues). She states, "You're in principle or you're on your ass! What a teacher the mountain is ...".

Wearing skis and sensing the earth from one's dantian, one finds oneself standing comfortably, shifting from one foot to the other, and getting immediate feedback on whether one's knees and hips are loose and relaxed. Then there are all the points of attention in the feet, particularly relaxing the feet (challenging when one's toes are feeling cold). This can make so much difference in one's awareness of the skis and one's sense of connection to the ground.

I always remembered an instructor telling me to, "Let the skis ski," and not to fight against what was happening in any moment. Sensing the whole ski from one's dantian, feeling the snow and ground, and letting oneself have an unfocused gaze – taking in the full picture of what is actually happening – heightens the exquisite sensations of the sport.

And in the midst of all these physical sensations, one learns to empty the mind in order to have instantaneous response to what is being presented in the moment. So, in essence, skiing becomes a powerful mind-body-spirit experience.

In Tai Ski practice, all this is done without a particular instructor leading. While we might suggest to each other a focus on a particular principle, there is the freedom to explore the mountain in whatever way is most nurturing to us.

One day of skiing this past season in Götzens was very foggy. The group decided to follow one another and stay connected to each other's dantian. The leader had to expand his awareness to the last person coming down in order to modulate the speed and keep everyone together. In doing this, the group reported feeling safe and relaxed. The sensation of having each person connected by their dantian, aware of the people they could see in front, helped to keep the gaze further away and more like "looking at the horizon" with a relaxed gaze. This relaxed gaze was much more meditative than fixating on the snow in front of us!

Patrick Watson once said that playing with speed, momentum and gravity is "where you must feel the straightness *inside*, or you are lost. The combination of angles, speed, and the pull of gravity tell your body what straightness is in relation to them." With this, we learn to be more flexible about our concept of straightness and explore how an angled body is still straight with regard to gravity and movement.

Since Tai Ski is a time of recreation for most of us, we tend to allow ourselves to feel more open to relaxing, being in balance, letting go, creatively exploring both inside and outside. Plus, the environment provides a sense of almost like being above the clouds. A song by Reinhard Mey does a nice job of summing up the attraction to Tai Skiing:

Über den Wolken muß die Freiheit wohl grenzenlos sein.
Alle Ängste, alle Sorgen, sagt man,
Blieben darunter verborgen und dann
Würde, was uns groß und wichtig erscheint,
Plötzlich nichtig und klein.

*Above the clouds, freedom must be borderless.
All fears and all sorrows, they say,
Remain hidden below (the clouds), and then
Whatever seems big and important to us
Suddenly becomes vain and small.*

Whether you are an expert skier or have never tried skiing, we recommend Tai Ski as a profound and enjoyable way to practice and embody principle.

