

## Ilan Amit – 23 years of working together

By Assi Ben Porat

### The truth that is hidden from us

Suddenly I saw myself in front of a vast, enormous, featureless, infinite void, towards which a strong wind was blowing past the place where I was standing. It was a frightening, unbearable sight, and yet I knew for sure that not just I personally, but all of us are facing this empty, wind-stricken void every moment. Yet since this sight, this breath of the infinite, is so difficult to bear, all of us construct closed, opaque boxes that take us in, apparently keeping that aspect of infinity out. My situation is unique only in that my own box had just been smashed to pieces and I had the enormous privilege of witnessing it all. I knew that in no time I would be forced to construct a small, new box and enter it, one way or another, and only a memory of the present moment would persist. New habits would replace old ones, I would gradually become used to being blind and the shock of this condition and its meaning would gradually subside. We cannot stand such shocks for long.

By Ilan Amit, from "The Lamp"



Photo: Osnat Krasnansky, Haim Aherim magazine

## **End of February 2013**

“For some reason, I found it difficult to climb the stairs today”, said Ilan Amit as he entered my apartment for his regular lesson, arriving from Jerusalem at the end of his work day. I asked him whether he wanted to practice, and he suggested that we sit for a few moments and then decide. We drank Chinese green tea, as was our custom, yet stayed sitting for about 20 minutes – longer than usual. Afterwards, we got up and had an ordinary lesson – which was to be our last. 2 weeks later, Ilan bid us farewell. He was 78 years old.

Our work together began on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1990, about seven or eight years after Ilan went blind. He was 55 years old when he began to study Tai Chi; the movements of which he was only slightly familiar with and had never seen.

This was quite a challenge for both student and teacher, a challenge that continued for over 23 years. In retrospect, I think that neither Ilan nor I expected that our work together would continue over so many years.

## **Tai Chi in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Until the 1920s, the way of movement known as Tai Chi Chuan was a rather obscure martial art for self defence, based on Taoist philosophy, the Tao Te Ching book, the I Ching - the Book of Changes, The Art of War by Sun Tzu, Chinese yoga, and spiritual practices known as meditation and known to only a few families and a few of their outside students.

However, once Tai Chi was brought to public awareness in China at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its circle of practitioners grew and expanded, and gradually captured the hearts of additional populations, that were attracted, in particular, by the physical-health benefits as well as the mental and spiritual well-being benefits. Even people who were not interested in martial arts and self-defense arts were able to practice these movements thanks to the numerous, additional benefits inherent in Tai Chi. Its development and spread in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was simply awe-inspiring.

Tai Chi reached the West – Europe and the US – in the 1960s, and to this day continues to thrive and captivate people throughout the world.

Over the course of its expansion, Tai Chi gradually began to spread into new fields and different populations outside of its traditional sphere. Today, at the beginning of the year 2015, various versions of Tai Chi are practiced by the elderly, by people with disabilities and special needs, people with MS, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's as well as people with mental traumas, such as shell shock or PTSD, for example, and more.

In the case of people with mental or physical disabilities, the encounter with traditional Tai Chi is perplexing and extremely challenging. The perplexity centers on how to keep the essence of the movement, shape and principles, while adapting them to the specific person or population.

Such a meeting as that between Ilan Amit and myself in March 1990, would have been almost impossible to imagine 15 or 20 years earlier.

## **The Early Years**

Dr. Ilan Amit contacted me following a recommendation by his wife's son, Dan Toren, who was a student at the Tel Aviv studio where I taught Tai Chi groups. He initiated the contact between us because he was aware of Ilan's desire to practice movement despite his blindness. I asked him for some time to think it over.

I was not familiar with Ilan or his capabilities, although I had come across his name a few years earlier when he was a guest editor of a biannual journal named *Machshavot* (Thoughts). The life and soul, initiator and editor of the journal was the late Zvi Yanai, and the financing body was IBM. The issue I read, edited by Ilan when he was already blind, had an article about Tai Chi that included an interview with a Japanese Tai Chi teacher named Mitsiko Nitobe, who lived here for a while and was among the first Tai Chi teachers in Israel. After becoming blind, Ilan had tried to study Tai Chi with Mitsiko Nitobe for a short time. It seemed that even back then Ilan was interested and curious about Tai Chi.

I hesitated; uncertain of my ability to teach him, as I was, at the time, still a young teacher lacking experience teaching blind people. To the best of my knowledge, back then no documentation or record existed of teaching Tai Chi to the blind or visually impaired that could have helped me and allowed me to learn from the experience of others. The year was 1990, about five years before the start of the Internet era, so even if some recorded experience had existed out there somewhere, it was not easily accessible as it is today.

Therefore, I consulted Judith Partos, my Chinese yoga teacher and questioned her as to my readiness. She replied, "You are never ready for what you must do. You just do it and that makes you ready." I decided to try. I called Ilan and scheduled our first meeting.

As I prepared to teach Ilan, several questions arose, not necessarily in the following order: Should I teach him like any other new student I had taught privately? Should I separate and isolate certain elements from the series of movement in order to examine Ilan's abilities, so that I would know how to continue. Would work in pairs, such as Joining Hands be possible? Should I teach him warm-up and preparation exercises (Nei Kung), a stand-alone series of exercises, or only a small portion of them? Should I teach him one of the Chi Kung series to which I devoted myself during that period, that were relatively easy from the point of view of movement execution as compared to the Tai Chi series of movements?

Finally, I decided to relate to Ilan as I would to any other student, and according to his abilities, make the necessary adjustments. Looking back now, it seems that I made the right choice.

In the first lesson, I could already sense that Ilan had both willingness and ability. Over the years, I would learn much more about his extraordinarily, focused learning capabilities with respect to Tai Chi, and would be introduced to his diverse range of interests and activities.

A Tai Chi teacher has three primary means at his disposal: visual demonstration, verbal communication and touch. With a sighted student, the visual teaching method usually dominates. We were all once children, and childhood is the time when observation and imitation are our natural learning state. The teacher's explanations (verbal communication) when teaching a movement simplifies the visual demonstration and place an emphasis on the movement's execution. The explanations are also the means to convey the theory, principles and content. Touch, if necessary, is an additional means for conveying information, such as a gentle correction of the position of the arm or back. I clearly recall the touch of my teacher, whether to correct a movement or when working in pairs, and this is a sense memory that remains with me to this day, and is as sharp as ever. I usually tend not to use physical contact often at the initial teaching stages, until the student's sense of personal space is calm and relaxed, and I have gained the student's trust. In Ilan's case, the visual method was, of course, impossible. I had only two means at my disposal – words and touch. Although over the time, I would find myself relying, more and more, proportionately, on physical contact, my guidance during the lessons was essentially verbal.

From the conversations we held over the years, I gathered that before he was blind Ilan used to go for long walks in the mountains. As a participating member of an internal work and study group based on the teachings of Gurdjieff, he also practiced the complex group movement (Sufi dancing to music) that was part of the inner work cultivation. Once he became blind, he could no longer continue his walks in the hills or the movement groups that required orientation in space and in relation to people around him. In one of our talks, Ilan said that in the modern age, with people spending most of their time sitting in offices, driving or traveling, it is advisable to practice some type of physical movement every day, as time permits. After he had gone blind until he suffered a heart attack, Ilan and his wife used to go for short walks around Tel Aviv, and he later used a treadmill at home on a daily basis for many years. He said that despite its importance, for him, walking was a mechanical act. His interest in Tai Chi and his desire to learn it in depth stemmed from his wish to progress beyond monotone physical activities such as walking, without detracting from its value.

For the first 2 years, Ilana, his wife, joined us. The purpose was to also teach her so that she could help Ilan practice at home. At my request, one of my assistants joined us and taught Ilana while I taught Ilan. Finally, Ilana felt that Ilan no longer needed her help, and, due to back problems, decided to discontinue the study of Tai Chi.

I divided the first lesson into two parts. I devoted the first part to teaching some of the warm-ups exercises and the second part to teaching the first movement of the Tai Chi series of movements. I intended, if things went according to plan, to teach Ilan the short form in Yang style, according to Professor Cheng Man-Chi'ng.

The warm-ups exercises named Nei Kung are a set of exercises for relaxation; release and warming of the muscles and joints. This is an inclusive series that exists independently, while also preparing the student for the study of Tai Chi movement. The exercises in this series contribute to the acceleration of blood circulation in the blood vessels and increase the flow of the Chi in the meridians. They include, for example, momentum and rhythm exercises performed with minimal effort while transferring weight from foot to foot. They accustom the body to moving as one whole unit, with the hands following and tracking the body, and the body, on its part, following the work of the hips and legs. There are additional exercises that use circular movement to discretely move each and every joint in the body. Additionally, a few of the movements taken from the Tai Chi Form are performed over and over again.

During the first half of the first lesson, I began by teaching Ilan only a very few movements from the warm-up series. In the following lessons, I gradually added more movements until we had completed the entire set over several months. I avoided the use of physical contact and used speech to describe the actions that Ilan should perform. However, first of all, I asked Ilan to stand with his feet placed apart at shoulder width, and instructed him to observe and relax his body from the very top, with the head hanging from its crown. Hanging head is a Tai Chi term for imagining a golden string, tied to the crown of the head and pulling the head upwards to the sky, while the body gradually relaxes in unison with gravity. This posture is an introduction to what is termed standing meditation. Through this meditation, Ilan was able to melt the tension in his body, learn to let go, and gradually become more familiar with different parts of his body, separately, as well as, his body as one whole and undivided unit. For many years, this was our starting point at the beginning of every lesson, before we would start moving. Over time, I attributed more and more importance to this starting posture.

In the second half of the lesson, I tried to teach Ilan the first of a series of movement that from now on I will refer to as the Short Tai Chi Form, Yang style, according to Professor Cheng Man-Chi'ng.

When teaching the opening warm-up exercises, as well as when teaching movements that are part of the form - the challenge was the same. How to guide Ilan so that he would be able to perform the movement at a reasonable level of accuracy? Since I chose, from the beginning, to use verbal communications as my main means of instruction, I decided to deconstruct every movement into its major components and describe to Ilan what he should do. I would start with a description of the actions of the lower part of the body; in other words the placement of the feet, the movement of the body's weight and the actions of the pelvis and waist. Next, I would focus on the torso – its placement and direction, and end with a detailed description of the actions and locations of the hands. From the very first lesson it was clear to me based

on the result, that verbal communication and deconstruction of the movements into their key components was the most suitable method for us, and the subsequent lessons reinforced this conclusion. As I mentioned earlier, Ilan approached the study of Tai Chi with a desire, willingness and extraordinary capacity for learning and concentration that he had acquired prior to becoming blind, and remained with him afterwards. These capacities dictated our work method and enabled me to examine the level of precision that Ilan was capable of attaining when learning movements. I noticed that Ilan's good, basic connection with his body allowed him to follow verbal instructions and perform, more or less, what I asked of him. Therefore, at a relatively early stage I took the deconstruction of movements one step further and began to divide the movements into smaller and smaller parts. What guided me as to the extent of the deconstruction was Ilan's capacity. In other words, when I saw, for instance, that a certain movement and its location had been internalized, I would stop the disassembling of the movement at that point, and turn to connecting the parts of the movement back into a whole movement. I persisted in applying the principles I mentioned earlier: firstly, to get to know the movement and the role of the lower part of the body, and only then add the movement of the upper part of the body, and its expression through the hands. Classic Tai Chi writings describe an important principle: "The motion should be rooted in the feet, released through the legs, controlled by the waist and manifest through the fingers". I tried to teach Ilan this principle throughout the process of learning the Form. When I felt that the movement was reasonably connected, I would reiterate this principle, and sometimes I would simplify it into a kind of mantra that I repeated over and over again: every movement is **legs, torso, hands**. I knew that if Ilan would internalize this principle, the movement would connect and be sufficiently inside him. Neutralizing the tension in the hands and understanding that the source of the movements is in the legs and waist is also difficult for seeing people. For Ilan, this difficulty was sevenfold. A Tai Chi movement that is performed slowly, with focused attention and intention, emphasizes the practitioner's ability to separate weight while maintaining balance, that is, standing on one foot comfortably and placing the weightless leg in the required direction and then shifting the weight, and so on until the end of the Form. Even for a seeing person this learning process is not easy. For a blind person such as Ilan, this is a doubled difficulty: standing on one leg and maintaining your balance, as well as concentrating on the changing directions during the movement. I had to find a way for us to deal with these two essential issues.

Maintaining equilibrium as well as spatial orientation are skills that depend, although not totally, but to a great extent, on our sense of sight. Anyone who has ever tried to stand on one leg with his or her eyes closed or blindfolded knows how challenging it is, and, to what extent, our balance is based on our vision. Anyone who knows the Form and tries to perform it, in part or in full, while blindfolded, will undoubtedly find it difficult to maintain the directions of the form.

I decided to attempt to isolate the issue of balance, and at the end of the warm-up exercises we devoted time to practicing the separation of weight and standing on one leg. Ilan would use a cane for support to help him balance himself on one leg, and to exercise, using a circular motion, the joints of the weightless



leg. Next, without using the cane, I asked him to shift all his weight to one leg, hang the crown of his head, loosen his body and let his weight sink downwards, and with the other leg remaining weightless, to lift it gently, slowly and attentively two or three centimeters from the floor, and try to stand in this posture for a few seconds. Afterwards, to shift the weight to the other leg, repeat the previous steps, and thus alternately several times. Next, I asked Ilan to do the same while walking slowly and taking small steps. We continued to practice the separation of weight and the standing on one leg exercise in every lesson throughout all our years of working together. Ilan loved this exercise and its internalization played an important part in his ability to relax and let loose while learning and practicing the movements. A no less challenging and complex issue that we faced throughout the form was the issue of maintaining the right directions. Learning any of the movements belonging to the series of Tai Chi movements also means learning its direction. The form movements refer and relate to the four cardinal directions and the four diagonal directions. During the initial years, I primarily used verbal guidance to direct Ilan to the right direction required for every movement. I knew that we understand directions from the way the human body is built. Even with our eyes closed, we understand what forward, back, left and right mean.

Therefore, when I asked Ilan to turn left, for instance, and place his left foot at a ninety degree angle in relation to his right foot, and shift his weight to this foot, align his body in the direction to which he shifted his weight and turn his right foot, from which the weight had been lifted, to a diagonal angle of forty five degrees, as the form prescribes - he was capable of doing so. If his movement was inaccurate, I would ask him to make minor adjustments until the direction was accurate. Slowly and gradually, over several years, Ilan developed a sensory memory within his body that helped him, to a reasonable extent, maintain the direction of movement. A rectangular carpet, two by three meters in size, located in the room where we worked also helped us. Ilan would practice the form on the carpet. Although it was rather thin, Ilan could sense it through his feet, and when he'd step off the carpet, he'd correct himself.

In 1997 we moved to a more spacious apartment, and installed a wooden floor in the guest room that also served as the teaching studio. After a short while, Ilan asked me to stop using the carpet. At this stage Ilan felt more confident and verbal corrections were sufficient, and even they grew more and more infrequent. In later years, by the time that Ilan was practicing the Long Form, more than once there was nearly no need to correct the directions, and sometimes, when it was necessary, I would wait a bit and somehow Ilan would correct himself spontaneously during the movement, without even being aware of doing so. Of course, in the case of a real divergence or if he was in danger of bumping into something, I would correct him. In any case, I tried to keep direction comments to a minimum, and thus to allow Ilan the experience of moving without any "interruptions".

A year before his death, Ilan, his wife, my wife and I visited Dr. Amir Amedi's laboratory for artificial vision at the Hebrew University. During the drive to Jerusalem, Ilan, who was capable of remembering routes and maps in his mind, guided me and told me when to take a right turn off the main road to Hadassah

Hospital where the lab was located. In one of the studies conducted in this lab, researchers tried to use a camera, software and earphones to convert shapes and colors into sounds, that the mind of a blind person would be capable to translate visually into an ability to read signs, orient himself in space, identify objects, etc. We hoped that Ilan could use one of their tools to maintain the direction when practicing the Form. Ultimately, this was not realized because the initiative was still under development and according to the law, Ilan, because of his age, was not entitled to participate in experiments that were conducted in the laboratory (70 was the age limit for participation). Incidentally, during the meeting, Ilan managed to surprise the laboratory personnel with his quick grasp when sitting in front of a monitor with headphones, and his ability to identifying the shapes and colors based on the sounds.



Photo: Osnat Krasnansky, Haim Aherim magazine

## The Middle Years

In 1992 we moved to a new home, where we lived for five years, until 1997. As I mentioned earlier, a short time later, Ilan's wife Ilana stopped participating in the lessons, and Ilan continued his studies with me by himself. During the five years that we lived in this apartment, Ilan, who used to come with his wife or with a taxi driver who would drop him off at the entrance to our building, insisted on finding his way on his own, with the help of his cane only, from the entrance gate to the path leading to the front door of our apartment building and up the stairs two floors to my apartment. At the end of the lesson he would make his way back, and wait on the street for Ilana or for a taxi. Whenever Ilan arrived, and when he walked



away, I would observe him from the balcony, tracking his progress and making sure he found his way. He always found his way.

We completed studying the warm-up exercises during our first year of work together. Learning the entire Short Form took us another 2 years. It usually takes a “normal” student about 1 year to learn the Short Form. In any case, when we finished learning the Short Form and Ilan remembered the entire set of movements and was capable of practicing the Form at home, the structure of our lessons began to change. We no longer performed the set of the warm-up exercises, and only continued practicing the commencing stance (standing meditation) and the separation of weight that I described earlier.

Now that Ilan felt a sense of achievement and knew the series of movements, we had time to focus on in-depth work and on accuracy. We would meet between 3 to 4 times a month for a 1 hour lesson. Ilan would perform the entire Short Form and then we would focus on the first movements of the Form, from the starting stance (Wu Chi) to the Single Whip movement. I assumed that working on a limited number of movements over time would enable us to focus in-depth and assimilate the movement on the physical level and in terms of shape, and internalize the underlying principles of Tai Chi. I also assumed, from the insights I acquired both as a student and as a teacher, that what I understood and implemented, in terms of the shape and underlying principle of a certain movement, would hold true and be valid for all movements, and that these insights would, therefore, impact on the entire Form. My work in the studio with regular students was similar, but there is, no doubt, that elements of my work with Ilan seeped into my teaching method in the studio, and, especially, the ability and possibility of deconstructing the movements into their smallest components.

We devoted several months to each one of this limited number of movements. In every lesson, I would ask Ilan to repeat the movement we were focusing on many times. This repetition acted like a stream, whose water constantly flows over the pebbles. When we repeat a movement, or part of a movement, over and over again, our familiarity with the movement grows. It is “recorded” inside us, and a natural process of optimization and polishing of the movements occurs. This method allowed Ilan to concentrate on the internal sensations that every movement produced inside him. While we repeated the movements, I would gradually add various emphases related, on the one hand, to the specific shape and form of the movement that Ilan was practicing, and on the other hand - principles and nuances.

For instance, before executing each movement, we would refocus our attention on the crown of the head. When Ilan concentrated, he had a tendency to incline his head and back forward, so that we kept on practicing in order to establish a new pattern or habit based on holding the head and back upright. (I am not sure whether this inclination was due to his blindness, because I have also seen it among students with perfect eyesight.)

We also devoted a lot of time to focusing attention on the feet. In every movement we were working on, I would ask Ilan to make sure that the weight was spread out equally between the heel and the ball of the foot. In Tai Chi, the heel relates to the skeleton and bones, while the ball related to the body's movement, i.e. the joints, tendons, ligaments and muscles. This method helped Ilan focus his attention down to the ground, and over time to focus on and refine his legs work, and avoid incorrect positioning of the knee of the leading leg: the knee has a tendency to move too much in the two-thirds stance when the weight is on the front leg.

I used to emphasize that the first part of a movement is Yin in nature, the principle of yielding and receiving, while the second is Yang in nature - the principle of action. In order to deepen the understanding of this principle, I began to teach Ilan how to work in pairs through **Single Joining Hands** and eventually **Double Joining Hands**. Although Ilan understood the idea behind working in pairs very well, its physical implementation took us a long time, and he found it difficult to differentiate between hand and body in Yin, i.e. being in receiving mode, and hand and body in Yang, i.e. in active or initiation mode. In any case, pair work facilitated the study of the shapes and their understanding. From time to time, I used to show Ilan the practical, applicative meaning of the movement in terms of self-defense, but this remained an aid, a tool for understanding and carrying out the movement, and not a central theme.

In 1996 I published an Hebrew translation of the book "The Essence of Tai Chi Chuan, The Literary Tradition", based on the English translation by Martin Inn, Benjamin Lo, Susan Foe, Robert Amacker published in 1979. I translated the book into English with the help of two of my students, Ruth Sarig and Miranda Kaniuk. I gave Ilan a copy, and he read it using his computer, which was capable of scanning the text and converting it into Braille or to the sound of a reading voice.

Ilan's encounter with the Tai Chi Classics enabled us to connect what we had learned up till then with the theory and principles of the Tai Chi, and from that point on the texts became a familiar reference framework.

"The Literary Tradition" of the Tai Chi Chuan includes a reference to the concept of Chi -the flow of the life energy through the energy paths(meridians). While it is possible to refer to the Tai Chi Form as a Chi Kung Form, I suggested to Ilan that we study Chi Kung separately, and he immediately agreed. In a slow and gradual process lasting several years, I introduced Ilan to two main Forms of Chi Kung: one was Eight Pieces of Brocade, and the other, the Flying Crane Chi Kung. At this stage, after Ilan had overcome the initial difficulty of learning the short Tai Chi Form, it was easier for him to learn Chi Kung, and it was easier for me to teach him.

I did not need the same degree of deconstruction of the movements into their components as I needed when teaching the Form. I introduced him to the guiding principle of Chi Kung, whereby by coordinating movement, breathing and consciousness (attention) we accelerate the circulation of blood in the blood vessels, and of life energy – the Chi - in the meridians. I chose to start by teaching the Eight Pieces of Brocade, which was relatively easy. This Chi Kung, as its name suggests, consists of eight movements performed in a specific order. Each movement is performed several times, and then goes on to the next movement. Chi Kung has a clear physical manifestation in relation to the Tai Chi Form, and it includes accentuated stretching of the arms and legs. In some of the movements, the legs are positioned in a Horse Stance – with the feet spread apart and parallel, with seated hips and bend knees. After a period of practice, I taught Ilan the Flying Crane Chi Kung. This is a relatively long series consisting of five motion sentences, and an additional sentence in which we hold the hands in a motionless posture. This Chi Kung is soft and gentle in nature, and is close in spirit to the Tai Chi Form. As I mentioned, we devoted several years to the study of these series, and during these weekly sessions it preceded our in-depth work in Tai Chi, and the learning of the Long Form.

Gradually Chi Kung turned into an independent practice unto itself, as well as a practice that supported and prepared us for the Tai Chi Form. I hoped and wished that the study and practice of Chi Kung would strengthen this aspect of the Form.

The encounter with Chi Kung also inspired Ilan's curiosity, openness and endless desire to learn. We could discuss the enigmatic subject of the life energy called Chi and how Chi Kung practice encourages the emergence of physical sensations attributed to Chi and develops the ability to be aware of it. To this end, we talked in general about the way we learn to feel our body non-verbally, how we learn to pay attention, to look and sense areas or different parts of the body in motion, or at rest, and how we connect all the sensations into one single sensation.

In the interim years (1992 – 1997) the nature of our lessons gradually changed, and they included a short preparation stance and weight separation exercises, some Chi Kung, and in-depth work on the Form. If we had time left, we would practice pair work. This continued until the end of 1996. Close to the end of the interim period, in 1996/7, the structure of the lessons underwent a change once again. Ilan wished to learn the Long Form, and the Double Edge Sword Form. Since the scope of the lesson's contents expanded, the weekly hours did not suffice to cover all of it, and I had to rethink the structure of the lessons. I remember telling myself that more than six years have elapsed, and the question was no longer how I would teach Ilan, a blind student, Tai Chi, but rather how I would organize our time optimally. I knew that it was not possible or advisable to pack too much into our weekly meetings. Therefore, I decided to try a different approach to the time at our disposal. As I mentioned, we would meet three to four times a month. I decided to view the month as a single time unit, during which the central focus of each lesson

was to learn the Long Form, and only then to devote the time we had left to other topics, i.e. Chi Kung, the Sword Form, and once in a while also pair work.

### **The later years 1997 – 2013**

In May 1997, we moved once again, this time to a penthouse apartment on the fourth floor, with no elevator. The location of the building and access to it required Ilana or the taxi driver, who drove Ilan from his place of work, to accompany him to the entry door to the building, and from there Ilan would climb up the stairs on his own. At the end of the lesson, I would accompany him down to the street, and wait with him until Ilana arrived or the taxi we had ordered came.

Over the next two to three years, Ilan completed the study of the series of movements comprising the Long Form, the Sword Form and the Flying Crane Chi Kung. Over the subsequent years, we repeated and practiced these series several times. Each time we repeated a series was an opportunity for Ilan to relearn and re-familiarize himself with the shapes, improve their execution and the sense of direction, and the process of internalization of the principles of Tai Chi. We were so absorbed in the learning process that it was easy to forget that several years earlier we would gladly have sufficed with much less, or in other words, with learning the warm-up exercises and the Short Form.

Ilan really connected with the Long Form, and, after a short while, we stopped practicing the Short Form altogether. In one of our last years, Ilan even learned, relatively easily, the Mirror Form, also known as “left-side”. Although in the Tai Chi world the subject of performing the Form in two directions is in dispute, I can bear witness that in Ilan’s case performing the Form in two directions had a positive effect on the symmetry of his movements, and as a result in the sense of direction. The human body is not perfectly symmetrical, neither physically and externally, nor internally and sensory-wise. Ilan’s left side was relatively more “closed”. If, for instance, I’d ask Ilan to raise his arms to shoulder height, his left arm would always be a bit lower than the right one, while Ilan would feel that they were the same height. I would correct him verbally or by touch. Slowly and gradually, I saw that the symmetry of his movements improved, whether practicing Tai Chi or Chi Kung. Another example was turning left or right at a ninety degree angle. Here, also, Ilan had to internalize the correct physical sensations of the directions of movement, since with his right foot he found it more difficult to find the ninety degree angle compared to his left foot. Studying the Mirror Form had, to a certain extent, a correcting effect.

## The Sword Form

Learning the Sword Form, just like the Long Form, was virtually inconceivable when we set out working together. But now, at this stage, it seemed almost natural. The difficulties of the beginning were now behind us. Ilan had studied warm-up exercises (Nei Kung), the Short Form, Chi Kung, pair work and was in the midst of learning the Long Form. I believed I'd found the right way to teach him, and it was clear that his desire and capacity to learn were extraordinary, and unrelated to his blindness. Practicing the Long Form takes about twenty minutes (depending on the pace). You must remember a series of movements and directions, and move while attempting to internalize and observe the guiding principles, such as hanging the crown, open joints, relaxed yet vibrant body, separation of weight and root, coordination between upper and lower body, etc.



At this stage of our work together, Ilan was capable of learning and practicing the external Forms of the movement, while at the same time paying attention on the underlying guiding principles. He had, therefore, at his disposal, the foundations for tackling the Sword Form.

We used a practice sword made of wood. At first, I let Ilan hold the sword, feel it and its weight, and described its various parts to him. Next, I taught him to move the sword in a figure 8 movement in a horizontal position, with the handle or point of the sword leading and outlining the figure 8.

The process of learning the Sword Form took one year, but over the next few years we repeatedly studied and re-learned it. Since Ilan had already gained experience in learning various movement series, the process was relatively easy and we were able to focus on how to hold the sword and in an attempt to move it as precisely as possible. The work room was relatively large. I positioned Ilan in a specific, fixed location, from which he began to perform the Form. If he succeeded in keeping to the right directions, he was able to move relatively freely, without worrying that the sword would hit the wall, paintings or the television screen. While when performing the Long Form, Ilan succeeded in maintaining the correct directions. During the first years of our sword studies the issue of directions required close supervision. The series of sword movements is more dynamic and the movement expands from the inside to the tip of the sword. When performing the movements, Ilan's arms tended to move too much, and this caused him to "forget" his lower body – his waist and legs. The result of this was an inability to maintain the right direction. Therefore, once in a while I would ask him to perform a movement or just a few movements

without the sword. This allowed him to focus his attention on the Form, without the sword. Only afterwards did we add the sword. Thanks to this method, Ilan succeeded in uniting his awareness of his body from the soles of his feet to the hand holding the sword and to the tip of the sword. As I mentioned, we returned to practicing the Sword Form several times over the years, and each repetition enabled a deepening familiarity and understanding of the Form. As Ilan's familiarity with the Form deepened, his sense of direction and orientation in space improved. His orientation within the room grew so sharp and precise that he internalized that in certain parts of the Form, he must correct his position in the space in order to prevent the possibility of striking furniture or the wall. A Tai Chi friend, who was present during one of our lessons, later told me that had he not known that Ilan was blind, he would have assumed that he had noticed some kind of obstacle.

## Pa Kua Chang

Pa Kua Chang is one of the three sisters of the Internal Arts: Tai Chi Chuan, Pa Kua Chang and Xing-Yi. They hold many principles in common, but differ in the movement characteristics and approach. Pa Kua was the last element added to our work together. In this case also I agreed to Ilan's request, so that over the last seven years we somehow found time for an additional learning process. Our work included the Form (The Eight Mother Palms) and walking in a circle while maintaining postures and shapes from the Form and executing changes. There is no doubt that Ilan's familiarity with the Tai Chi Form provided him with solid foundations for learning Pa Kua Chang.

The Pa Kua Form is composed of eight parts. Each part is performed symmetrically - once to the right and once to the left, and the end of each part is linked to the next part. The difficulty in executing this Form compared to the Tai Chi Form is that unlike Tai Chi, in which we move in relation to the cardinal directions and corners, in the case of Pa Kua, the Form relates and refers to a circle. Learning this Form took two years, and the directions took a long time. Eventually, there was a significant improvement in the directions, but my gentle intervention was sometimes necessary.

While learning the Form, Ilan had to learn to walk in a circle. One of the distinctive characteristics of Pa Kua Chang is walking in a circle with the hands of the practitioner hold in various shapes from the Form. While walking, the practitioner change directions and perform movements from the Form in a structured or spontaneous, random manner. The method I used to enable Ilan to learn to walk in a circle was as follows: I would stand in the center with a pole in my hand. His hand was stretched out at shoulder height in the direction of the center of the circle, continuing the shoulder line. The elbow would be open but not locked. His hand lightly touched the pole while he walked in a circle like a compass. If his steps were accurate, the elbow opening would remain constant. If he stepped into the circle while walking, his elbow would bend, and then he would correct himself. If he drew away from the circle, his elbow would lock, and once again he would correct his steps. As in the Tai Chi Form, Ilan had to learn the proper sensations in



his body. Over time, he learned to measure his steps until he was able to walk in a circle whose radius was the length of his arm.

Pa Kua Chang was a real bonus for Ilan. He loved walking in a circle. At the first stage of his Pa Kua studies, we would practice walking in a circle in three different ways. Initially, Ilan would walk with his hands held loosely alongside his body, usually slowly. During the second stage, when his sense of the circle and walking stabilized, Ilan would hold his hands in the basic positions of the Form, in a kind of meditative walk. In the third stage, Ilan would practice walking in a circle while concentrating on a “Single Change” and “Double Change”, which are the foundations and principles of changing the walking direction in a circle. Later, Ilan began to practice changing directions and movements. I would ask him to walk in a circle and randomly ask him to change to a certain movement, or perform a unique combination of several changes and movements in sequence. Over time, I was able from time to time to ask him to initiate a change by himself during his circle walking.

In his daily life, Ilan would move around with a walking stick and was blessed with an ability, as he once said, to learn and remember the paths he had walked. For Ilan, the Tai Chi Form provided him, among other benefits, with an environment of freedom of movement in space without his walking stick, of orientation in space, of maintaining directions and of high concentration on his own movements, in surroundings that were relatively free of the fear of obstacles. The Pa Kua Chang Form and circle walking were another, different sort of freedom of movement in space, especially as walking in a circle merged with Ilan’s love of walking that dated back to when he could still see.

## Summary

The starting point of our joint work together – Dr. Ilan Amit and I – was an attempt to see whether it was at all possible. We had no great expectations or aspirations. I responded to Ilan’s desire to learn. My teaching evolved out of Ilan’s desire, his curiosity and his ability, but also a weighty and substantial limitation – his blindness. Throughout our joint learning process, his desire and ability to learn, slowly and gradually pushed aside to the margins the issue of his blindness as a limitation, and the learning process, and not his blindness, became the focus. There is no doubt whatsoever that Ilan’s part in this was central. He did not make a big deal of his blindness in his relations with the outside world, and caused the people around him to feel at ease next to him. He had a clear internal “vision”, an ability to absorb and focus, and an excellent memory. All these traits led us to deal with what was truly essential, in other words, with the search for and finding the way to enable him to learn and perform the way of movement known as Tai Chi Chuan.

Someone once asked me if I had actually found a method to teach Tai Chi to blind people. I answered no, that working with Ilan was a specific case, and that I would need to find the correct and suitable method

for that particular person. Several years ago, one of the teachers that helps me in the studio volunteered for a few months to teach Tai Chi to a small group of blind and visually impaired people at the Center for the Blind in Tel Aviv. I thought that I could, perhaps, contribute and assist him based on my experience with Ilan. It quickly became apparent that it was not possible to project my experience with Ilan onto other blind people, especially when also teaching a group of the visually impaired. While he taught at the center, the teacher had to find the appropriate method for him and for the small group of blind and visually impaired students. This taught me to avoid the tendency to generalize. In Ilan's case, I was working with blindness and this specific person. Therefore generalizations about the blind should be avoided. Any person who is by chance blind is also a unique individual. If we had not been the right teacher and the right student for one another, I doubt that we would have managed to continue our work relations for so many years. I learned a lot from our work together. Mainly, I learned that we must never turn our limitation, or that of another into the main focus, because if we do – it will turn into one. Work with Ilan was characterized by this approach, both on his part and on mine.

A few years ago, it occurred to me that it would be a good idea to document our work relationship. I asked Ilan and he agreed instantly. Thus, in 2007, a joint interview with Ilan and myself was held and published in Alternative-Life magazine. The interview was translated into English, and both versions, in Hebrew and in English, were uploaded onto the Web. Since then, many people have read it, and I have received numerous responses. One of the emails I received was sent by Robin Waters from Basalt, Colorado, and she encouraged me to film a short documentary about our work together (and she later suggested that I write this article). I asked Ilan, and once again he gave his consent immediately. I contacted Ofer Inov, a friend, cinematographer and director and asked him to help me, and he agreed right away.

The filming began in July 2012 and took one month. The footage included documentation of Ilan and myself during a lesson, and several hours of conversation with us. The film's editing was completed in March 2013, shortly after Ilan's death.

I hope that the interview from 2007, the short film from 2013, and this article, will together provide at least a partial record and testimony to our many years of work relations.

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**Photo:** Osnat Krasnansky, Alternative-Life magazine

**Links:** Tai Chi in the Dark: [http://www.arttaichi.com/he/taichi\\_in\\_the\\_dark.pdf](http://www.arttaichi.com/he/taichi_in_the_dark.pdf)

**Short film:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=267VFMUcfdg>

**Links to books written by Dr. Ilan Amit:** The Lamp - [http://www.amazon.com/Lamp-Not-Quite-Spiritual-Biography/dp/9072395646/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1428427869&sr=8-1&keywords=the+lamp+ilan+amit](http://www.amazon.com/Lamp-Not-Quite-Spiritual-Biography/dp/9072395646/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1428427869&sr=8-1&keywords=the+lamp+ilan+amit)