

Tai Chi – health or holistic

I seem to be hearing a lot about 'Tia Chi for Health' lately. Understandable, perhaps, when we are in the middle of a pandemic. Even the Tai Chi Union for Great Britain, seems to be moving that way through its association with the Chartered Institution for the Management of Sports and Physical Activity. The object seems to be to promote tai chi for health and influence the NHS with tai chi as an alternative therapy.

Now, those of you who know me will be aware that I have never promoted tai chi for health. Certainly not as a cure for anything. Any kind of exercise, done regularly, will help to keep you healthy. It is a case of 'use it or lose it' and as you get older it is *very* easy to 'lose it'. It is a case of, whatever you do, just keep doing it. You might have to roll back a bit on the heavy weights or the marathons – although I read recently that a 101 year old man is still running those – but in general just keep moving.

That isn't to say that tai chi doesn't have some special benefits, especially in the area of balance in older people, and there has been quite a bit of research on that front. Peter Wayne from the Harvard Medical School has written a book¹ about how he uses tai chi in his practice and details research on its potential effect on various conditions.

There are plenty of anecdotes as well.

My first teacher, I was told, had a serious heart condition when he started tai chi. When I met him he was a fit, versatile guy, his tai chi form bordered on the balletic. He died from cancer 13 years after starting tai chi. At his funeral his son confirmed to me how ill his father had been with heart arrhythmia and how, because of tai chi, he had come off of all his medication and was, to all intents and purposes, completely cured.

I frequently mention my knee, the reason that I started tai chi. It was damaged by 20 years running on pavements, it 'went' all of a sudden. It certainly would not support my weight in the beginning. It took about four or five years of daily practice plus a couple of acupuncture sessions before it was fully fixed and today it will happily take all of my weight.

The many anecdotes are why, I think, people sometimes arrive with unrealistic expectations. My worst experience of this was while I was still teaching for John Ding at the Master Ding Academy. Two young men arrived one morning wanting to start learning tai chi. They both looked pretty fit but I went through the usual "Is there anything I should know about?" routine. "Yes," said one of them, I have kidney cancer." I was rather taken aback but he had been reading about tai chi and really thought it could 'cure' him.

So I am always cautious when it comes to tai chi and health. Not that I don't think it has something to offer but I always downplay expectations and never make claims or, especially, promises.

Think about the tree pillars of tai chi chuan: meditation, martial art and health. If you just focus on one aspect you are in danger of losing the true depth of experience that tai chi has to offer. In my view there is a lot of misunderstanding, especially about the martial aspects.

Mention 'martial art' and most people assume that it is about fighting. 'Self defence' will produce the same assumption. Hollywood is largely to blame. Every movie depicts a fight with spectacular leaps and kicks, these days even movies not specifically labelled 'kung fu' manage to get some in. You do know that they use wires don't you? Not to mention the editing and, these days, CGI?

When I started tai chi I had the same view and wasn't – still am not – interested in fighting. But I also took the view that training in that environment, covering the whole gamut of possibilities I would gain all of the benefits. As time went on I realised two things: first, and most surprisingly, I had absorbed the martial aspects of tai chi and second, martial arts are actually about *not* fighting.

I came across a book by master Shi Ming, *Mind over Matter*², which is all about using martial arts training to develop our mind and to learn to use it instead of our mind using us. Mostly it is about focus. He says that martial art training can develop, what he calls, 'supranormal' levels of awareness and mental ability. And, above all, he says that, at the higher levels, martial arts are about '*not* fighting'. If I may quote Jackie Chan who plays Mr Han in the *Karate Kid* remake (Mr Miyagi in the first series): “Kung fu is not for fighting, Kung fu is for study and self improvement.”

There is an explanation for why tai chi may be good for health. It also applies to other systems such as yoga and qi gung. In fact we should include Taoist Nei Gung, a discipline in its own right which is very much about health.

In his book *Mindfull exercise*³ Dr Peter Gryffin presents a considerable number of independent research papers which suggest that some diseases are the result of hypoxia, or lack of oxygen to parts of the body. He goes further, citing instances where oxygen has been introduced to the site of tumours during chemotherapy and how this improved the effectiveness of the therapy. He argues that the breathing technique we use in tai chi and qi gung improves the body's uptake of oxygen and that the relaxation we also employ distributes it better throughout the body. (The same proposition applies to yoga, by the way.)

Tai chi is a holistic practice. We talk about mind, body and spirit working in harmony. Think about the 'spirit' being 'you' working with your mind and body and you might get a better idea of what is meant..

Practising tai chi just might keep you healthy. The martial aspect might help you focus, make you more aware of, sensitive to, other people and what's going on around you. But focus on just one aspect and you miss everything else on offer.

And a warning that I issue to all new students: you may read about the amazing things tai chi will do for you. The downside is, it will only happen if you practise!

¹ *The Harvard Medical School Book of Tai Chi*, Peter M Wayne PhD with Mark L Fuerst, Shamballa Publications

² *Mind over Matter, Higher Martial Arts*, [Shi Ming](#) (Author), [Siao Weija](#) (Author), [Thomas Cleary](#) (Translator),

³ *Mindful exercise*, Peter Anthony Griffin PhD, YMAA Publication Centre

