

And then there was chi...

There is much nonsense talked about tai chi but without a doubt the most controversial has to be the matter of chi. Our internal energy; do we have it? Does such a thing exist. How can it exist; there has never been any proper research, you can't measure it or find the pathways through the body. How does it, how can it, flow through you? People even ask: "Do you believe in chi?"

Most of those objections come from our western culture. From western medical practice which tends to have a compartmentalised rather than a holistic approach to health and in particular to sickness. Now I am not setting out to 'prove' that there is a such a thing as chi. You are entitled to your doubts based on the logical questions above. Anecdotal evidence is not considered good enough by the establishment and I can offer nothing else.

On the other hand, in the orient, most people would wonder why the question arises at all. (These days that may not be 100% true; recently I met a Chinese gentleman who was interested to know about my tai chi practice. He was about the same age as me and reckoned that it was about time he gave tai chi a go himself – not with me, he was a tourist and I wonder if he did look for a teacher when he got home. One of his questions to me was to ask whether we practised 'energy breathing'. When I replied that we did he seemed genuinely impressed. "Mind you," he said, "even some Chines are sceptical.") On the other hand we once taught a Chinese lady, a very fit seventy something. Leaving the class one morning she told my daughter that she should avoid cold drinks after training as it was bad for the chi. I have had other Chinese students who just take chi for granted.

There is a tangential practice called Taoist Nei Gung. The exercises are all about developing 'chi' to boost health and develop longevity. Somewhere in the 17th century these exercises were absorbed into a martial art to become, what was eventually called, tai chi, though it is a bit unclear as to who first used that name. Tai chi was not the first, and is not the only, internal martial art to be developed in China. Bagua and h'sing-i are both still practised.

When we start learning we do what we have been taught to do all of our lives, we move using our muscles. As we develop we learn to relax and move our whole body, use our centre and rotate on our spine. Arm, legs and torso become one unit. It can be a very powerful way to move.

But the masters of old talk about something else; about 'issuing' power. So we have to ask: 'what is that and where does it come from?'

In his 'ten principles' Yang Chen Fu talks about power coming from the legs, travelling up the spine and being issued by the hands (others talk about it starting in the feet). Getting yourself properly anchored to the floor – rooted – certainly makes a difference to how you move, especially if you are testing postures.

There is no doubt that you could reduce tai chi to body mechanics. When you get it right, the combination of balance, weighting and co-ordinated movement are hard to beat. In fact Peter Ralston covers all of the points in his book: *The Principles of Effortless Movement*.

Ralston has practised tai chi and there is little doubt that is where many of his ideas come from. (He based a whole new martial art on it.) But for me, after you develop the ability to move your whole body as a single unit there is something else, another element, still part of you but a bit indefinable. When it is there everything works, you test postures and it works but you feel nothing. This is what we are training to achieve, to realise this other element.

So do you believe in chi? Do you believe in arms and legs?