

## The form

The public face of tai chi is the 'form'. The sequence of dance-like movements that are unique to the system. Performed well, and perhaps by a group of people, it can look almost mystical. It is what attracts people to tai chi. Indeed some people think that it *is* tai chi.

It is easy to understand why this might be. There are schools of tai chi that teach nothing else; do not check positions for structure or the transitions for power. They never consider the potential applications of the moves. So tai chi chuan – the great ultimate fist – becomes just 'tai chi'.

Whatever you are looking for, whatever you want to do, wherever you want to go with tai chi learning the form is crucial. The first instructors' course that I took was, rather to my disappointment at the time, all about the form. I had expected much more but for a whole week we just worked on the moves. We tested the applications and we looked at the yin and yang values of the positions.

As much as some people think that the form is all that tai chi is about others regard it as just a nuisance, something that is unnecessary in the pursuit of the more esoteric side of the art; the development of 'chi' which can effortlessly send someone flying across the training hall. But understanding the form and its function is critical to practising tai chi at any level, particularly if you want to explore its higher aspects.

In fact practising the form will give you everything. It is a perfect exercise. When you move you shift your weight from leg to leg, you turn, you bend, it involves kicking and transitioning to change direction. So, while it is almost non load bearing it moves and stretches pretty much every muscle in you body, including some inside that you don't usually think about.

After a while you find that you become more aware of your body, how it moves and how it becomes more connected. Yang Chen Fu says: "If I move my little finger my whole body is engaged in the movement." It isn't something you consciously develop, over time it just happens.

When I started I filled in a registration form for the academy I was joining. It included a question for new students: what are you interested in – exercise, meditation, martial arts? I ticked 'exercise' and 'meditation'. Martial arts? Not interested in fighting; completely non-violent me. Then one day, after about three years I guess, I realised that I had learnt the principles of the martial art without ever setting out to do so.

A student once said to me: "When I practise the form regularly I feel as though I am living in my body rather than in my head." He meant, I think, that he felt more grounded, more in touch with himself. And here is the problem: we all, to a degree, live in our heads. Our mind is our master. Once we learn to connect with our body we feel more in control and this is where we find that feeling of 'well-being' everyone talks about, we learn to trust our body and our balance improves. Most people, I think, if they feel that they have a balance problem try to control their movements, focus on how they walk, always look at the ground in case they trip, but this only makes the problem worse. You need to be grounded and trust your body to do the job.

In the beginning learning the form is an intellectual exercise. T.T. Liang says: "In the beginning you use your mind." You are trying to remember how to do this move and then the next move. It is hard, and you are trying hard to learn something that is very different. But if you stick at it, without realising, you will get to Liang's second stage: "Next you use your body," he says. Gradually the form becomes 'body memory' and you no longer need to think about it.

So whatever you want from tai chi just practise the form. If you can't do all of it – it is pretty long and there may be time constraints – do what you can, what you know or a few favourite moves. Don't worry about making mistakes, in the immediate term they don't matter, they will get sorted in the class. The main thing is to do it; as often as you can but don't beat yourself up if you miss a day or two.

And, one day, it will be perfect! Well not really, none of us achieves that but it will feel good and you will feel that all that hard work was worth it.