

The holistic exercise

'Tai chi is a holistic system'. Let me put that another way: 'tai chi can be many different things to many people'.

I have written before about different aspects of tai chi; sometimes it is a good idea to step back and look at things differently.

So let us ask the question again: 'what is tai chi?'

Tai chi is usually translated as 'the great ultimate'. Or, if you add the word chuan to give us 'tai chi chuan', its full and proper name, you have 'the great ultimate fist' acknowledging its martial arts roots. But not everyone is comfortable practising a martial art and indeed it is, in my opinion, a largely misunderstood concept.

So let us look at its component parts:

For some – many – people tai chi is an exercise system; others regard it as moving meditation; for others it is a healing practice. Tai chi has a wide reputation for curing what ails you and people have made many claims for miracle cures, recoveries from physical injury in particular. It is widely accepted that tai chi can help improve balance in older people and I have read reports that claim cures for osteoporosis and type two diabetes. Aside from a knee injury which caused me to take up tai chi in the first place – and I was only looking for some exercise by the way, not a 'cure' – I regret that I cannot personally attest to any miracles.

There are two elephants in the room: is it a martial art? And the much disputed topic 'chi'.

Taking the last first, the existence of 'chi' or energy is much disputed among western practitioners. Certainly it is not part of our culture, it is not accepted by western medical practitioners. After all, you cannot measure it, take its pressure or track its flow through the body the way you can blood for example. If you could I am sure that 'big pharma' would come up with pills to boost it or reduce it or whatever was thought to be required. On the other hand Chinese medicine considers good chi to be the root of good health. Sickness is usually caused by blockages in various points of the body. Chi, they say, flows along meridian lines that run all through the body. Applying acupuncture needles at specific points along these meridians, chi can be stimulated and blockages cleared. The Chinese students that I have taught just take chi for granted. I have never needed to teach them techniques to bring it into their tai chi practice.

The reason that tai chi has such a reputation for boosting health is that its practice stimulates chi flow which in turn boosts the immune system.

Or not: *you* practise the form and chi gung and make up your own mind.

Mention the subject of martial arts and people immediately think about fighting – Bruce Lee, Claude van dam Blam, kicking, punching WINNING! I am sorry, if that is what you want, go somewhere else. There was a tai chi school that proposed taking tai chi back to its roots as a martial art; its USP was 'chi free tai chi'. I noted from its website that students were responsible for providing their own 'body armour'. As a journalist I do not use the word 'unique' lightly but I have never seen this proposition anywhere else.

The Chinese have always practised fighting arts. Villages, families would develop their own systems and compete against each other. Competency in fighting skills could be useful for travellers

in a landscape riddled with robbers and bandits especially for those of a religious bent, monks and the like for whom it was forbidden to carry weapons.

At the same time some people practised 'secret' Taoist systems designed to boost health and promote longevity. These internal, or 'nei gung' exercises and meditation promoted softness in the body, and were designed to boost chi.

Somewhere in the 17th century someone realised that, by combining nei gung practice with a martial art, it was possible to produce a system of self defence that was not reliant on physical strength alone. There was, and still is, more than one system; we have Bagua and Hsing-I along with tai chi but it is the latter that we are interested in.

The Chen family is largely credited for developing tai chi as their 'secret' martial art, Yang Luchan with learning it from them and 'going public'.

You can still practise Chen style, it is to this day 'thumpier and punchier' than Yang style. Where we 'stroke the birds tail' it has moves with names like 'Buddha hammers down!' Mind you, applied properly, stroking the birds tail could break someone's neck. Not that we would ever practise that in class.

As a non-load bearing exercise system tai chi is, in my opinion, unparalleled. If exercise is all that you want, and providing you practise several times a week, it will keep you supple and flexible, it will tone you up – perhaps a bit surprising that – it will keep you sharp too as it requires a lot of concentration and it will help your balance. There has been much research into the latter aspect and, given that as we get older our balance can deteriorate for all sorts of reasons, it is a good practice to be involved in. You gather from that that age is no barrier in tai chi.

Talking about the health benefits is a bit more difficult. No one can, or should, promise you a 'cure' for whatever ails you. I like to tell people that 'it won't cure disease but it can heal you' which I define as making you feel better about yourself and putting your problem into perspective.

Having said that it is great for helping stress and The Harvard Medical School has published a book: *The Harvard Medical School Guide to Tai Chi*. The author, Peter Wayne, is assistant professor of medicine at Harvard. In it he discusses much of the research that has been carried out into tai chi and he also uses it as a therapy for his own patients.

Tai chi can be straightforward and simple as an exercise system or it can be a deep subject with its own theory, philosophy and history. If you get into it, it is a lifestyle and a lifetime's study. It can also be elusive. Every time you think that you have 'got it' the goal moves and you have another hill to climb.

In time it changes the way you feel, the way you move and stand every day. It changes the way you deal with the world. The more you practise the more you will discover about your body and what it can do. Testing postures in the class you may discover that you can push your partner across the room without, apparently, 'doing' anything. Here a note of caution: that kind of thing gets addictive. You want to show off your newfound, and apparently magical, skill to all of your friends. It probably won't work outside of a class situation. If it does, and in the class too, be careful that you don't lose your way. It is all too easy to turn your practice into a couple of 'party tricks'. And in this context another thing to look out for is ego. Showing off how good you are might make you feel great but tai chi requires a degree of humility. You might think your newfound abilities mean that you have mastered tai chi but most likely you will just get stuck. Remember, you can learn from a complete beginner as much as he or she can learn from you.

I would be the first to say that tai chi doesn't suit every one. It needs tenacity and perhaps a degree of obsession. But you don't need to go for everything all at once. This is the great thing about tai chi, as I said at the beginning it is holistic, you just make a start and see where it leads you. After all, fifteen years ago all I wanted was a bit of exercise that wouldn't hurt my knee.