

Bonsai Tai Chi

The Blog



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Uploaded 16th October 2011

A beginners guide to tai chi self defence

The received wisdom says that to become competent at tai chi takes many years or even lifetimes. In no aspect is this more true than in the martial arts aspect.

Now what is true is that to become truly competent at anything takes years. These days, wisdom and experience are discounted by the measurable knowledge gained from a three-year degree course. The external martial arts will show you how to punch or kick someone very quickly and grade you to measure your competence. You are unlikely to learn anything useful after two or three tai chi classes – moreover there are no grades to tell how good you are getting. If you pick the wrong teacher you might never learn anything about tai chi as a martial art.

So if your need is to learn a self defence technique you will probably pick karate or perhaps one of the modern street fighting systems that are currently popular. Unless you already know a lot about martial arts, and sometimes even then, you are unlikely to pick tai chi.

But perhaps you should because with external styles there is a problem. If someone attacks you what is likely to happen? If you are a woman the most likely thing is that you will be grabbed. Go into taekwondo mode and what happens? You have about one punch or kick and if that doesn't disable your attacker – and it probably won't – you now have a hurt, angry bloke on you hands. Even if you are a man and someone starts to push you around can you respond? The aggressive guy in the pub is not going to follow your rules of combat and is unlikely to look like Trevor, the guy you train with and go for a pint with after the class; more Neanderthal probably.

And, I have to ask, what are you going to use for muscles? A kick or punch needs some power behind it and if your aggressor has just finished a shift on a building site and you have just finished an eight hour stint in front of a computer...

Tai chi, on the other hand, uses softness to deal with an attack. This may seem a bit puzzling, a contradiction even. If you are grabbed by a meathead surely your only way out is to struggle, to try to fight? Well not really, that kind of response is what is expected and just gives the other person something to work with. By relaxing, being soft and not fighting will initially confuse him giving you time to extricate yourself from the situation and, preferably, get the hell out of there.

These techniques are relatively simple and easy to learn. Dealing with punches and knife attacks is a bit more difficult and takes longer.

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The problem, always, is that you do not know how you will react to a situation. Go into panic mode and, hard or soft, nothing will work. And that is where tai chi training can help. The tai chi system, the form, teaches you how to stand, how to move and to use parts of your body you didn't know existed. We train to make these things not second nature but just what we do every day. How we stand at the bus stop, how we get onto the bus. Oh, and how to breath so that whatever we do, whatever the situation we remain relaxed. You can be totally stable so that if someone pushes you, whether accidentally or not, you aren't going to fall over or even stumble. With any luck they will just bounce off. Tai chi is a martial art, though it is often taught as just an exercise system. But it is not about fighting, we do not spar even though there is a lot of one-on-one practice. If you get into a situation tai chi is about taking control, winning may just be a matter of one of you walking away. If it comes to contact then your aim is simply to finish off the other guy. Don't be fooled by the soft approach, get it right (or possibly wrong) and you can break bones, or could even kill your opponent!

And, so far, I have not even mentioned chi. Developing your internal energy is part of the tai chi training. It is our 'secret weapon' but that subject is for another day. 🤖