

Possibility

It is difficult to put into words how Tai Chi can affect you. It can sound rather airy-fairy, other-worldly and not very well rooted in the realities of day-to-day life. My experience has been the opposite - that it has offered me a way of facing head-on what life brings, which is tough but gentle, simple yet profound, disciplined yet endlessly creative. This opens up a sense of possibility and aliveness which comes from working with the energies we already have and seeking to remove, by gentle practice and compassionate good humour, any obstacles that get in the way.

O.S.

Yielding

Yielding is an exercise I learned at Taiji class - "Imagine yourself as a tree, with branches yielding to the force of the wind, they will always return to the original position when the wind has calmed".

I applied this when emotionally troubled by someone who had bullied me for 12 years, faced with yet another threat of dismal prospects, and financial insecurity, should I not agree to certain terms, and with a possibility of court yet again! I became like a tree, not imovable but bendable - and strong. I softened my attitude by tone of voice and spoke calmly to the "Force".

I was dealing with, "If that's how you feel then go ahead", I agreed. This seemed to diffuse his power, and I was delighted that the outcome was he told me the following day, he wouldn't be going ahead with the threats.

Now I apply this softening, yielding attitude to many aspects and situations, I feel stronger, more confident - also my body doesn't ache so much from being tense and rigid.

Lynne

Dance

To surrender to a rhythm and dance is a joy but if I feel self conscious I can't let go. I am prone to tripping over due to an old leg injury and fear making a fool of myself, particularly when dancing with a partner that has all the moves and with whom I really want to let go!

Things have improved with Tai Chi. My body parts are of the same body - they work together. Relaxing to join the rhythm I feel the earth under my feet. It powers my hips with the rhythm. Movement follows this lead and the dance flows until I trip. This only serves to turn the flow, so the dance may catch the fall. Tai Chi also helps me catch the fear so that I can relax to join the rhythm. Otherwise I must observe the fool and remain patient until I feel the earth softly under foot again.

Alan

Just Be Yourself

I have just finished the Short Form. We were asked by our teacher to discuss in groups of two or three why we had started the course, what we expected from it and what we had actually got from it.

I joined almost by accident. My wife and son had decided to try Tai Chi, I didn't even know what it was but I decided I would give it a try with them. I ended up starting 6 months before my wife and my son took up Kung Fu instead.

In the conversation I said I had more strength in my legs and felt my hips were more supple. No mean feat at 20 stone and 50 years old. I also mentioned that I felt the changes in my strength had affected my swimming and the knock-on effect was that I was now able to exercise for longer periods and my stamina had increased.

We talked about the frustrations of certain points in the course where it went too slow or too fast. It was interesting that we couldn't agree on which points they were.

I came to Tai Chi on the back of a heart attack. The physical damage from a heart attack can be partially repaired through rehabilitation, exercise and medication. No one tells you about the damage to your confidence. I felt guilty for what I had put my family through and a complete fool as my lifestyle had 'heart attack' stamped all over it. When it happened it appears I was the only surprised party.

Tai Chi has started to give me some self-confidence back. The important message from Tai Chi for me so far is that I am good enough to do it. I can learn from it and look forward to learning more from it in the future.

Rob Ventham

I wrote this in 2002. Where am I now? (2006)

Facing yourself and your relationship with all around you is a something that really never occurred to me before taking up Tai Chi. As I said in my original letter it was almost an accident that I started at all.

Letting go enough to let the playing of the Tai Chi form happen rather than 'doing it' has been a revelation for me. I don't achieve it very often and it doesn't happen all the way through the form but when it does it's a wonderful experience. It can feel like there is no effort involved and I am not making conscious decisions to move, it just happens. I still sweat as much at the end though.

My experience has not been all positive. I have gone through ups and downs in classes but staying with it has paid me dividends I couldn't have dreamed of. Beginning to understanding yourself helps you to begin to understand and appreciate others around you. Learning Tai Chi has been a fulfilling and enjoyable experience over all and I am continuing now because I enjoy it. I went back to beginners class again last September. I've enjoyed it so much I'm thinking of doing it again this September!

If you're not sure about it, find out more, I couldn't have been more sceptical at the beginning.

M.E.

If you know how to find the point of balance (rest) in the body, You can easily settle the details. If you can settle the details, You can stop rushing around. If you can stop rushing around, Your mind will become calm. If your mind becomes calm, You can think in front of a Tiger (your energy). If you can think in front of a Tiger, You will surely succeed. Mencius (371 – 289BC) In 1981 a young Tai Chi teacher who had trained with Gerda Geddes gave an introductory workshop at The National Youth Dance Festival. I was at this workshop and I remember she demonstrated the form, taught us the first posture and read us the poem above (the words in brackets in it are hers.) Like many training dancers I was always on the lookout for new techniques and ways of moving. I expected to come out of a 'good' class exhausted and browbeaten! Yet here I felt calm and hadn't even broken sweat. I was however spellbound, asked if I could copy out the poem even though I didn't completely understand what it meant, and knew I wanted to learn Tai Chi.

I came out of dancing with an injury a few years later, stumbled through life and jobs, always intending to learn Tai Chi one day and then in 1991 everything came to an abrupt halt when I got ME. Learning Tai Chi or doing virtually anything became impossible, a lot of the time I wasn't even well enough to leave my bedroom. It did however leave me with plenty of time to think about how I came to have ME and how to recover. After fifteen years of dismantling virtually every belief I had lived by, I was well enough to come to a Tai Chi class.

I reckoned I'd be too tired to manage all of the class but this turned out to be the least of my problems. Watching someone experienced in playing Tai Chi is incredible to witness. I'm aware of presence, of a limitless quality to the movement, yet no ego, no persona, and no apparent effort. Space and air divides and reforms around them as they move through the form.

Trying Tai Chi myself felt very different. I felt hemmed in by every movement. I didn't want to take a natural step I wanted to leap, I didn't want to stand shoulder width apart I wanted to do the splits. When I realised the body moved as one unit I felt like I'd been put in a straight jacket, I wanted to bend and twist. I knew overdoing every movement wouldn't help the ME and wasn't what Tai Chi was about either. Rather than take off round the room I tried to rein myself in and anchor myself to the floor. In between the muscular effort to grab the ground and my mind wanting to take off was my knees. I found myself sitting out of classes because they were getting wrenched and strained.

To go back to the poem, in my efforts to control the tiger I'd end up treading heavily on its tail at which point it would spin round and sink its teeth into my knee.

But I did get glimpses of how if I could find the point of balance and rest in my body and move from there, suddenly there was no battle, the movements no longer felt restricted but free, they just took care of themselves.

The frustration I was experiencing in the Tai Chi class was just a reflection of how I lived my whole life and probably how I'd come to end up with ME. I was constantly at war with myself, bullying myself into the person I thought I should be, at the same time as feeling frustrated and trapped by the limits and goals I set myself. I was driving myself by demanding energy that was an illusion rather than my true energy. If I could change the way I tackled Tai Chi I reckoned it was going to have enormous repercussions on everything else.

Surprisingly the way I found my way into the Tai Chi was through the Qigong exercises at the beginning of the class. I say surprisingly because initially these exercises had me levitating above the class like a demented wasp before we'd even started the form. With Tai Chi I felt frustrated by not moving much. Starting the class with Qigong where I was required to move even less and keep repeating the same movement was torture!

The advantage of Qigong I came to realise was I could work on one concept, for example moving from my point of balance without having to remember what came next in the sequence, or adjust myself to the demands of different movements. For instance where was my weight over my feet? How free were my hips? Now, I'd be reluctant to start the form without doing some Qigong first. It brings me into the right frame of mind and body for the class and often the rest of the week.

The Push Hands class also had a great impact on the Tai Chi. For me this really targets what needs to be in place to allow the form to be more than just a sequence of movements. Doing Push Hands can also change how I'm feeling fast. Although the ME has improved immensely, I still can feel pretty bad at times. On two occasions I have arrived at the Push Hands class sure I was only going to manage the beginning of the class before having to sit out and watch through a nauseous fog. Within minutes of starting I felt completely fine.

I feel very much like I'm still right at the beginning of learning Tai Chi, there are so many aspects to it, many I'm not even aware of yet. What I do find is through learning Tai Chi I get insights into how I'm living the rest of my life. Push hands in particular highlights how I relate to other people and react to them, I'm finding I'm listening more and interrupting less and even realising how I relate to/grip the steering wheel of the car! And in all the classes I see when I'm fighting myself or bringing myself to a standstill by trying to do two opposing things at once. I have more energy and stamina now than I would have believed possible 9 months ago. Keeping going for the whole class is not an issue. Sometimes I feel I'm moving from a point of balance, sometimes I get lost, sometimes I forget where I am in the form, but whatever happens I always come out the class feeling more centred, more integrated, more present and not at war with myself. It's not a case of seeing the light at the end of the tunnel of ME, it's that I can see the whole landscape outside the tunnel. This isn't only down to learning Tai Chi, but I've no doubt Tai Chi has been a significant part of it.

I appreciate being able to do Tai Chi far more now than I would have done before I had ME. Every time I walk into the class I feel privileged. There were so many years when even being well enough to get to the class was beyond me. In the past few years I've seen friends and family deal with illnesses where however determined they were, time and luck ran out for them. I've turned myself inside out to recover from ME, but that's not the whole story. I've had luck and time on my side and now I feel like I'm being given a second chance.

Sally Clark