

Why do we practice Tai Chi Chuan?

- Cornelia Gruber

It is fairly safe to assume that anyone who practises tai chi chuan for a reasonable period of time, either likes or loves it. But love alone is not always enough, it takes a certain kind of intelligence and logic too; body movement without mental input is a limited system of exercise.

Most of us, from time to time, get lazy about maintaining the discipline of regular practice of tai chi chuan. Most of us from time to time, have doubts about the usefulness of a martial practice, and most of us are not always in the mood for doing tedious work on our energy body. It is in these particular times that it is worth considering the question, "Why do we practice Tai Chi Chuan?"

It took me sometime to figure that out for myself.

Cornelia Gruber



Cornelia Gruber originally delivered this lecture at the 5th European Taiji & Qigong Forum staged on behalf of the Taijiquan & Qigong Federation for Europe (www.tcfe.org), last July in Bulgaria.

The question she raised stimulated much discussion and perhaps you, the reader, will feel compelled to participate in the on-going debate by way of writing your views for the next publication of this journal.

First Love

For many years I was very busy studying and practicing tai chi chuan without ever really asking myself the question, “*Why do I practice tai chi chuan?*” I had simply fallen in love with it during a martial arts exhibition in New York City. After spending hours watching the most splendid and mind-blowing presentations of expert martial artists, from many different styles and schools, from all over the country – the very humble presentation of a single tai chi chuan master was the one which really impressed me and left a lasting impression. The simplicity coupled with harmony and strength that was coming through these movements appealed to something very deep inside of me; and, as it is when you fall in love, you are swept away; you need no reason, no explanation and no justification. In my case it has turned out to be an extremely happy love affair, one which has endured over 30 years and one that is still continuing.

In the 1980’s Chinatown in Boston, USA was such an integrated and familiar part of the local culture that being part of a Chinese tai chi school was normal practice and caused no comments amid my non-practising American friends. They were used to seeing groups practice in the city parks and they more or less knew what it was about - at least they thought they knew, “*Ah! tai chi chuan, that’s the slow Chinese movements for health!*”

A Strange Practice

It was a very different situation in Switzerland 20 plus years ago. tai chi chuan, at that time, meant absolutely nothing to anyone that I knew. Anyone who did have an idea of it thought that it was probably practised by people who were ‘alternative’ and that it was a by-product of the hippie culture. Nobody ever asked why I did these bizarre movements, they just assumed it had something to do with me spacing out and being vegetarian. People in Switzerland who had heard of tai chi chuan were very rare and none of them had the vaguest notion of the important role that these strange movements played in the lives of many people in ancient China, where it was important to know martial arts such as tai chi chuan, in order to defend themselves. However tai chi chuan has eventually caught on in Europe and has now even become fashionable.

Gradual Acceptance

25 years ago my teacher Bow Sim Mark, was teaching in several universities in the US and tai chi chuan became an integral part of more and more public organisations, as well as being

included in self-development programs and in work with physical and mental therapy groups. Slowly but surely, Tai Chi in Boston was reaching beyond Chinatown into all kinds of city and neighbourhood centres. Now most people are aware that practising tai chi chuan is very beneficial to your health and keeps you fit, young and beautiful. That’s why there were more and more people doing tai chi.

Scientific Proof

Eventually serious scientific studies were being done which validated that which had only been accepted as folk-belief. From this research we now know that Osteoporosis can slow down with regular tai chi practice. Modern science has also found that connective tissue, which includes bone tissue, reacts and

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modifies itself according to demand. There are tissue builders and tissue removers which are continuously reconstructing our body including the skeleton. Wherever there is a regular impact because of posture or repeated body movement the stress causes a slight electric flow known as *piezo*-electric charge (pressure...) which can be read and interpreted by the nearby cells and communicated to the tissue organisers. This so called *piezo*-effect caused by repetitious exertion mobilizes the body to reinforce those particular areas. Since tai chi chuan - real tai chi chuan is whole body movement, we have a good chance of setting off this process on the whole bone structure. This very valuable asset of tai chi chuan provides another very good reason to practice, when you consider the extremely large percentage of old people suffering from osteoporosis - especially women. Osteoporosis specialists now highly recommend tai chi chuan as well as dancing or power-walking as being activities which are good for mobilising the bone-structure.

Professional Endorsement

Over the last few years I’ve had students referred to my classes by a wide range of health professionals including: osteopaths, chiropractors, psychologists and psychiatrists. One student had been referred by her neurologist and another by her otologist. These students obviously start tai chi chuan for a wide range of reasons and it seems like tai chi has finally convinced the medical profession of its health benefits. Because of this some health insurance companies in Switzerland even pay a modest contribution towards tai chi classes.

I’d like to cite one special case where I have seen such fabulous results, which were even contrary to the pessimistic prognosis of a very highly-esteemed medical professor. Françoise had been told by this professor, that her balance would be irretrievable for life since her inner ear had been damaged through several operations. But now, after many years of practicing tai chi chuan she has regained 70% of her balance! Her doctor said it was incomprehensible and thought it was a miracle but Françoise told him that it was all down to her practise of tai chi chuan.

Blood Group A

There is a current diet fashion which is based upon feeding you according to your blood-type. Each of the four blood types has its own foods and specific hygiene to observe. If your blood is group A – tai chi chuan is your sport! If you are from the group A, your brain functions in acceleration and you pass through phases of anxiety, irritability and hyperactivity. The more stress invades your system, the more you weaken. Your hypersensitive nervous system works to slowly crumble your fragile protecting antibodies which become too weak to fight infections and bacteria. If you don’t do anything against your natural tensions you risk contracting heart disease or cancer. If your blood type is Group A then try tai chi chuan.

Relaxed Gamblers

The most extraordinary reason to practice tai chi chuan that I’ve heard of comes from Atlantic City USA. One of the famous casinos created what they called a ‘stress-out room’ where the high-rollers would stress-out before they approached the games and feel perfectly cool gambling their fortune away. In that room a person covered with a veil was actually playing a tai chi form on a small stage to create the calming ambiance. – I am including this story as a hint, in case you ever run out of money – you might apply for doing tai chi in the casinos in Atlantic City, they’ve got plenty of it there!

Against Violence

Some of the following experiences are from people with a similar idea - *Why Practice Tai-Chi?* - but from a completely different perspective, with perhaps a more virtuous intention. The idea of tai chi chuan being a valuable educational support has arrived in public schools with great hope being put forward for tai chi chuan as a tool for orienting our future through our school children. A couple of years ago I accepted an invitation from a primary school to introduce very young children to tai chi chuan as part of a programme entitled, "A Day Against Violence" The teacher put forward the idea of planting a seed in very little children by letting them enjoy a playful martial art experience rather than the usual tough youngster's choices such as judo or karate which didn't fit with their new concept of non-competitive education. Maybe they would remember, the teacher thought, this one Tai-Chi experience from their primary school, and as a consequence, when they are looking to join a club, they will choose something with a constructive vision. Of course I could not refuse this class when the teacher had such good intentions and I fought against my initial response of "I don't have classes for children."

It turned out to be a great afternoon. To be really honest though, I will have to wait about 10 years to see if that class served its initial purpose, to whether or not that this is a good reason for doing, or in my case, teaching tai chi chuan

On several previous occasions I had taught children of secondary and high school age, where the teachers also had the idea of introducing the adolescents to a more constructive way of channelling their energies. With that age group, between 13 and 17, I

was not all that convinced of the impact of such a crash course in tai chi chuan. Maybe it had more impact on me as their teacher, since I had to call on every very last bit of patience, creating spontaneous improvisations in order to retain their interest, bearing in mind that they were forced to attend the class. Nevertheless I must admit that each time a couple of surprisingly positive reports came back from individual students.

Against Burn-Out

For seven years I taught summer camps for the public school teachers organized and sponsored by the federal department of education. This was my happiest experience with the public education system, probably because the teachers came voluntarily. Many of them attended to help them recover from their yearly almost burn-out at the end of the school year. Some of them wanted to learn tai chi as a relief from their cerebral occupation, to get a improved bodysense and some hoped to find exercises to integrate into their classes as a way of calming down an agitated classroom. Most of them enjoyed the experience and went home refreshed and some of returned the following year and some even took up regular classes in their respective towns. From the obligatory reports they had to write, I understood that it is justified to play tai chi chuan for the support of professionally stressed out people.

Therapeutic Applications

We can also find answers why in looking at therapeutic environments. Using tai chi chuan for therapy with people who have a serious mental handicap has not proven fruitful for me. I have tried over a period of time, working in a specialised home, where the staff were very open to the idea. We spend several lessons just swinging our

arms around before I finally accepted that the students would simply never get beyond that stage. I do admit that this failure might very well be due to my personal shortcomings in that patience is not my strongest point and therapy is definitely not one of my chosen areas of work. I aborted the idea of using tai chi chuan in these situations immediately after that experience.

Working with the Elderly

I'm also sorry to admit that I initially felt the same way with regard to working with the elderly. Many years I tried to get elderly people interested in tai chi chuan. Maybe it was because they held the class in a dining room where people were finishing off their lunch, not, in my mind, an ideal environment to practise. Around 3 years ago, in our school, we created a programme called "Tai Chi For the Elderly. This time, thinking about my previous experience in this area, I ensured that the elderly students would step into the tai chi chuan ambiance from the very beginning with no distractions. However, in my experience this specialised class is proving to be more like an ergotherapy and social event. Carmen, who is teaching that class is taking good care of the development in that group and going out of her way to bring these old ladies closer to tai chi chuan as at least a moving art. Despite this, after several years the personal investment of most of the participants is very limited and their motivation is disproportionate between social interaction and the real practice of the art. None of them has moved to regular classes as originally hoped. (The course was offered as an introduction to people to encourage them to do more exercise. (Maybe Linda Chase Broda of the Tai Chi and Special Needs Forum¹ can provide some good hints on how to get that group onto a more fruitful track.))



Specialised Work

I'm not personally convinced of the usefulness of specialised groups unless they serve as a bridge to the regular classes. It seems to me, that often the above mentioned people are already kept apart, as if society was only made for young and perfectly functioning members. Practicing tai chi chuan on a daily basis should be enough to mirror one's constant change in the body and in one's mind. Mixing ages and physical abilities has a real possibility for positive development in tai chi chuan. Working in this way Special Needs students would be able to explore the adaptability of the art. Every elderly person can become a light for the future of the art by proving that there are no age-limits to practice. I have one middle-aged student whom I've heard on several occasions say that they know they can practice tai chi chuan until they die. - That in itself is a good enough reason to practice!

Mental Disorders

With respect to mental disorders; if the student is able to come to a tai chi chuan class, then he or she can benefit, not only from the calming effect of the movements but also from the discipline and the interaction with other players. According to modern research 20-25 % of the population suffers from depression one time or another and in the last 10 years the University Clinic of Psychiatry in Zürich, treatment for depression has increased 250% times. It is therefore in our interest to make a special effort to include people with such problems in our tai chi chuan classes. Sometimes tai chi chuan is just about the only possibility left for interacting unless you have access to specialised psychological training. In our school we have had many people going in and out of such moods and tai chi chuan has proven itself very useful for maintaining the contact.

Good for Bankers

I recently had an opportunity to work in the very famous UBS bank. They hired me to give a tai chi introduction to their executives before a staff meeting in order to create a cooperative ambience. I ended up really liking this training, surely because it was to have an immediate effect on the group and therefore was to be a very goal-oriented class. We did 10% warm-ups to get them a bit tired and respectful for the art, 10% theory to get a glimpse of the extent of the art, 50% partnerwork to get them to interact and to put everybody on the same level, (Director Supervisor and Vice-Whatever) and finally 20% form to bring calm and centering with 10% form application in loyalty to the art. The result was positive.

Because I now know that it works, I accepted a request from a very prestigious consultant firm to teach their sales executives an early morning class before a seminar. This time the work was not quite as specific since all they needed in this case was a com-

pletely new experience which was a contrast to their normal activity. Yes, this turned out to be a good reason to step into tai chi, the need to take a break from habitual mind and work patterns.

Competitions

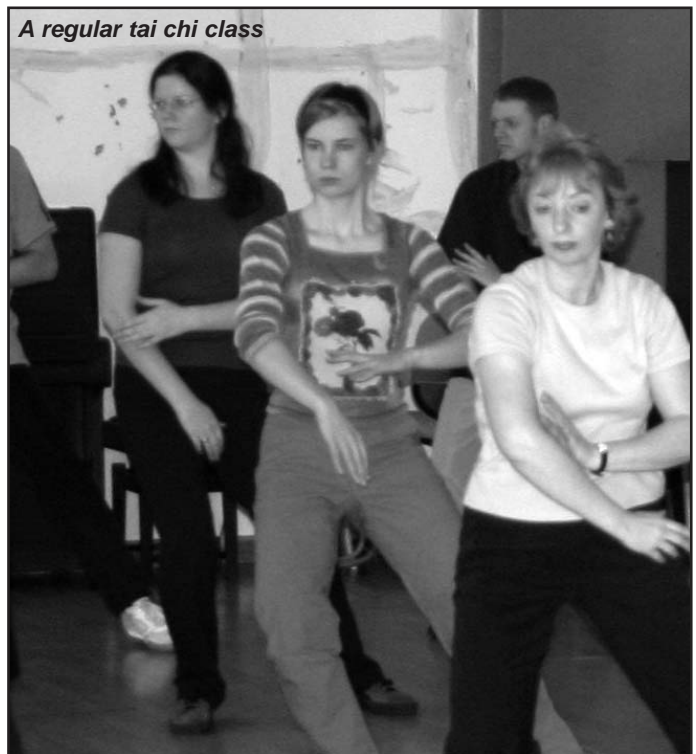
Tai chi chuan now also offers something for those who enjoy sport as competition. More and more countries are running competitions. These competitions are a reasonable alternative to more violent confrontations in hard martial arts and form competition is certainly more accessible to the average person than a figure-skating competition! Of course many tai chi players find the practice of competition in direct conflict with tai chi philosophy. To those people I recommend a visit to the Swiss competition of the so-called '*libres pousseurs*' (free pushers) in Geneva, where the spirit is guaranteed friendly and the winners are honored with a medal made of cookie-dough as a reminder that winning is relative and ephemeral and where they might share their medal with you over a cup of tea if you did not get one this time.

Finding Strength

To find one's optimal strength is a reason to practice tai chi chuan. Tai chi chuan training provides a fabulous method of developing ergonomic skill. We practice repeatedly how to achieve the best result with minimum effort; this is not just useful for martial purposes but also for normal everyday life. I see how this "increase" in overall strength brings reassurance to fragile people, especially to women who can discover that mass and muscle does not add up to superiority.

Cultural Exchange

There are many activities which promote cultural exchange but tai chi chuan is one of few that offers such a profound exchange on so many different levels. It is quite amazing to imagine people training in tai chi chuan everywhere from Africa to Alaska and from South America to Australia. On the other hand it is fully understandable when you consider how tai chi chuan works as a mind and heart opener. It has that wonderful quality to go beyond culture and connect with something universal. So one can practice tai chi chuan for reaching out and use it like a passport, one which gives you access to places you never dreamed off before!



With tai chi chuan having such a varied range of training methods and so many layers of benefits, it is useful to take whatever is appropriate to one's current need whilst also considering what one needs to progress further in the learning process.

Why do I practice tai chi chuan?

The answer reflects the place of development you are at, and vice-versa, realising where you are at, helps to put purpose into the practice. If you bear this in mind, tai chi chuan will serve you as a development tool for life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I like to tell you how I came to the decision to talk on this particular topic:

I had been teaching for many years and practicing for even more and I had to answer many questions, some easy, some difficult. If you teach, you know what I am talking about. One day in a rather large class, in the middle of doing the form, one of my students froze in action looking at me and saying out loud, "Why do I do this?" I busily started to explain the posture, the rules, the benefits but she said, "No, no, not that. I mean, why do I do tai chi chuan instead of something else, do you ever ask yourself that question?" I was at loss with words - but in my heart I knew, this is a perfectly justified question. And it has never left me since that day.

1. www.taichiandspecialneeds.co.uk

For information on Cornelia Gruber visit her web site at:

www.taichichuan-cornelia.com

Cornelia will be teaching at this year's Tai Chi Caledonia www.taichicalledonia.com