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Tai Chi Chuan - the ancient path to stress free living

By Matthew Rochford

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When I began practising Tai Chi in 1991 the thing that struck me about it was its power or at least the promise of its power. What I went on to witness and discover was that there was nothing mystical or particularly esoteric about the power of tai chi it was more just a case of doing it, following tai chi's unique set of principles and just witnessing what arose within me. When I practice my form (sequence of movements) it is never exactly the same but it is always beneficial.

Tai Chi means "the supreme ultimate" and Chuan means, "fist" so Tai Chi Chuan is in fact a martial art despite it's reputation for just being a gentle meditative exercise. When practiced as a martial art Tai Chi is both effective and powerful (but this takes a lot of practise to even glimpse especially when you learn that in Tai Chi, the main focus is to use the power of the mind in unison with the energy and power of the body to release force in whatever direction you want).

The benefits of Tai Chi are immense and include improved co-ordination, circulation, posture, balance and well-being. Because tai chi is practised slowly and with a relaxed focus the nervous system becomes calmer and so do you. This meditative effect gives you a clearer perspective mentally and in today's fast and hectic world this can only be a huge resource. In fact the stress relieving attributes are one of the main reasons why people start Tai Chi as it gives them a calm mind and real sense of physical emotional and spiritual health

Tai Chi started a long time ago so it's had time to develop and evolve into what we see today. This slow process of change which has happened to tai chi over the centuries is mirrored in the way tai chi is practised i.e. at a meditative pace with no rush to complete it's intricate and engrossing movements. The softness and flow of tai chi make you relax (you just can't help it!) but it's a rejuvenating kind of relaxation. At the end of a Tai Chi class people are buzzing with Qi (life-force), as the practice encourages your energy to flow and tension and blockages just seem to dissolve away. It all sounds very blissful and beautiful, which it is but you do have to put a little effort in to get the results. It's hard to get your head around that something so graceful and elegant can be used for self defence too, but

then again there is an old Chinese saying that 'the best fighters never fight' i.e. if you have no enemies internally or externally then there is no need for conflict. The philosophy behind Tai Chi (Taoism) is really useful too and includes the theory that if you fight force with force any conflict will get worse. It teaches yielding and flexibility to overcome any situation. This can diffuse a situation leaving room for negotiation and dialogue. When you take something like that into your daily life then you have gained a distinct advantage. Yielding encourages listening and when you listen you gain more information and it is easier to see where someone is coming from. In the workplace such a strategy would create less stress for everyone!

Part of the physiological aspect of tai chi includes the effect it has on our brain, our lymphatic system and our joints. Recent neurological research has found that tai chi practice encourages the brain to perform more effectively. This is partly due to the brain receiving more oxygenated blood (as the breathing technique in tai chi improves lung capacity and elasticity) but also because the meditative, calming effect of tai chi changes the brains frequency from beta (active normal waking waves) to alpha

(receptive between sleep and awake waves which are related to improved ability to learn and remember). The lymphatic system is partly responsible for detoxifying the blood and is stimulated by the gentle muscular work in tai chi. The soft relaxed movements of Tai Chi massage the lymph nodes improving their function and boosting the immune system. The joints of the body are often where aches and pains first creep in so maintaining healthy active joints is important at any age. Because the load bearing joints of the body are kept in strong alignment throughout Tai Chi and are never abused nor greatly impacted upon, their health and function is protected whilst the circulation of blood in and around the joints is increased.

All in all Tai Chi offers us a unique way to combat stress and learn new and valuable skills.

Matthew Rochford B.A.

Senior Instructor, The Devon School Of Tai Chi Chuan.

Matthew Rochford has been studying Tai Chi and Chi Kung for over ten years and runs The Devon School Of Tai Chi Chuan, which provides courses to businesses, hospitals and health clubs throughout Devon and in Europe. He is one of the few Tai Chi Teachers who actually hold a professional qualification. Matthew's work has been featured on BBC radio, Carlton TV. He has taught at The Mind Body Spirit Festival and The Gaia Visions Retreat Centre on Zante. Matthew is also the managing director of Blue Water Music, www.bluewatermusic.net. For further information about classes and courses please contact Matthew on 01364 631 545 or visit

The Art Of Tai Chi Sparring

By Laurence Clunie

Curious about Tai Chi but running short on time and patience to make an in depth research of your own? Here is a simple but accurate article on the topic of Tai Chi sparring. It's organized and easy to digest.

Tai Chi Chuan – the ancient path to stress free living

Tai Chi, also known as Tai Chi Chuan (taijiguan) or Taiji, is commonly translated as Supreme Ultimate Fist and is known throughout the world as a Chinese martial art that combines the principles of self defense with the mental and physical fitness. This art is practiced by millions of people these days for several purposes, including self defense and for its health benefits.

Sparring is involved in basic Tai Chi practice. Tai Chi sparring is in fact one of the most important stages of this ancient martial art. As noted in most resources, Tai Chi sparring is strongly considered as the only way to teach students of the art the importance of self defense, distance and speed.

Tai Chi sparring is practiced at a slow, meditative pace. According to its proponents, the slow and continuous movements are generally designed to impart the powerful physical skills of the sparrer, as well as to stimulate the flow of energy within the body. This slow, meditative pace involved in Tai Chi sparring also helps to develop balance, coordination of breath and movement, concentration and relaxation. Simply, Tai Chi sparring teaches you how to move easily without tension in order that your mind and body can function smoothly. I think this a great health benefit.

There are three major levels of training involved in Tai Chi sparring. The first has something to do with postures; the second with self defense applications; and the third with coordination of breath with movement.

In terms of posture, the Tai Chi sparring training primarily teaches you the right postures. What I am actually talking about here is where exactly to place the hands and feet when sparring. The training also includes the fundamental shape of the movement, including the transitions between these movements. According to some Tai Chi sparring experts, it is through the mastery of the right postures that the student can develop an insight into the nature of flexible strength. This level, however, requires long and diligent practice in order to master.

The next level of Tai Chi sparring involves understanding of the energetic and self defense applications. In the first place, Tai Chi sparring is viewed as an energy exercise. This notion perhaps stemmed from the fact that when practicing Tai Chi sparring, you are calming and energizing your body.

How does Tai Chi do this? First, Tai Chi sparring eliminates the impurities caused by tension, and then it rouses energy to flow through the body. It is this flow of energy that actually cleanses the entire body.

In terms of self defense applications, Tai Chi sparring simply teaches you to understand every move involved in the practice. The general rule here is that every move can be done at three levels, which is high, middle and low. Aside from these levels, the movements can also be performed in five directions, involving left, right, back, forward and center. For many Tai Chi practitioners, it is very vital that every

sparrer understand these applications so as to keep movements precise.

Finally, Tai Chi sparring involves coordination of the breath as well as the movements. What is usually considered in training is that you inhale with movements that lift or roll back, and in turn exhale with movements that press or sink. However, it is very important to note that in Tai Chi not every move will

require a full breath. The coordination between the breath and movement is something that happens slowly and in unexpected ways. In the end, your body will find its own breathing rhythm.

I hope you enjoyed reading this article. There is, indeed, a lot to learn about this topic, or even a lot to learn about the world. There's always something new to discover!

The article you have just read is just one of several informative articles on the subject martial arts sparring that you can find here:

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