



Tai Chi Newsletter

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Community Based Tai Chi & Chi-Kung for everyone

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World Tai Chi & Qigong Day



One World ... One Breath

Hundreds of Cities -
Over 70 Nations



www.WorldTaiChiDay.org

World Tai Chi & Qigong Day

Saturday 30th April 2022

It's been a few years since we ran a WTCQGD event but this year we've chosen to run three: Cotteridge Park in Bournville, Tamworth Castle grounds, and Beacon Park in Lichfield. For details email Mark or phone the number shown above.

Sessions will include demonstrations and participation classes so please come along and support us.



Tai Chi and Health

Keeping healthy is one of the main aims of those who practice Tai Chi. Hence it is most appropriate to pose the question: how does Tai Chi contribute to my health and wellbeing?

In the warmup exercises and Chi Kung (qigong), the rhythmic movements help the muscles and joints and keep the circulation active. The breathing exercises are vital for the lungs. The regular deep breathing energises the systems and increases the oxygen intake of the body. At all times breathing should be through the nose not the mouth. Breathing should be coordinated with the body movement. The general rule is that you inhale when you contract or pull back, exhale when you expand or strike.

The regular exercises help create the feeling of well-being. It is a known fact that exercises produce endorphines. Production of endorphines in the brain induces the sense of well-being and happiness. Of course, some people are happier than others during the classes; this depends on the level of endorphines, beside other factors.

Doing the exercises in the open air is another benefit. Fresh air contains more oxygen and is more energising to the individual. Practising the form at home is better if you have more space to move. If these practises are carried out in open space as in the garden, the benefit will be greater. However, avoid slippery surfaces.

Tai Chi helps you to be more aware of your surroundings. The more you practise, the more aware you are of the environment around you. To increase this awareness, you can practise parts of the form with eyes closed. One needs to be careful when changing orientation such as in turning and kicking with the sole and sweeping in the lotus movements (when you turn 180°). If you practise Tai Chi on this deeper level, your process of "anticipation" will increase through your increased awareness of your surroundings.

Posture is emphasised in all Tai Chi sessions, especially in "the form". Maintaining a straight back cannot be stressed enough. The spine should be held straight and vertical. One of the scourges of our present-day life is backache. Training oneself to straighten the back is a great asset in life, more so as one advances in age. Tai Chi practitioners should use the chance of practising the art to acquire the habit of having a straight back. The more self-conscious you are about that most important posture, the more it becomes a habit. Not stiff straight but as if hanging down, suspended from above like a string of pearls.

Tai Chi has a calming effect on the individual, and in our present-day stresses and tribulations that is an asset. Here, concentration and proper regular breathing during the sessions is of help. To get the full benefit of the sessions, a calm mind and a relaxed body are beneficial. In turn, the practise of Tai Chi will increase the calmness and relaxation.

Muscles and bones benefit from the exercises and form. The muscle tones well, rather than enlarges, owing to the gentle nature of the form. The bones are rendered firmer and healthier. As a matter of fact, Tai Chi is beneficial for sufferers of osteoporosis, though the exercises in these cases should be carefully monitored by the trainers.

Related to the above point is the help Tai Chi lends to balance. More about this can be found in the dissertation by Mark Peters at:

<https://www.kaiming.co.uk/falls-prevention.html>

Master Cheng Man-Ch'ing (who simplified Tai Chi to its present form) was a doctor and professor of Chinese Medicine. He directed many of his patients to take up Tai Chi. He believed that such practice would help his patients in combating their illnesses and enhance their recovery. There has been much research in Tai Chi and Health and the benefits have been proven through vigorous scientific methodology.

By Ahmes Pahor

Have I met a true Tai Chi Master?

A strange thing happened to me a few weeks ago, that I thought may be of interest to some of you. I was crouching in my living room with both feet on the ground, when my 10 week old Labrador Collie X – a magnificent creature, bounded up to me and placed his foot on the point of my knee. Now, I weigh 11 ½ stone and felt fairly stable. He weighs about 8 kgs. For some inexplicable reason I found myself falling backwards, almost in slow motion yet with not enough time to get my hand out to steady myself, it was almost as if I was totally disorientated. Having hit terra firma and regained my senses I immediately thought that my dog must be, just had to be a tai-chi master reincarnated. This however was immediately dispelled as he ran over and bit me on the nose – tai chi masters don't do that apparently – but nevertheless, how did a small puppy push me over, and why couldn't I stop him? It also brought to mind some ancient tai chi saying about using a force of 4 oz to move a bull.

Okay, so the dog pushed me over by accident and just caught me in the right place at the right time and with the right pressure – which tells us something about our nervous system. If the push had been harder, then my sensory nervous system would have located it and body reflexes would have responded to try and keep my balance. I may or may not have hit the floor but would have done so in a set of jerky movements as overcompensations set in, due to reflex muscle spasms trying to maintain some sort of body alignment.

At the end of the day, we are a bag of neurological reflexes, and to have an output, or motor response, we need a sensory input. We interact constantly with our environment both consciously and unconsciously. If we are unable to sense the force coming in then there is not a lot we can do about it until it is too late. As soon as we lose our centre of gravity, we tend to disorientate, rather than correct. The aim is to practice, and fine tune, always moving into balance - relaxing into balance - rather than fighting against gravity.



Our reaction to a hard shove or trip is usually to the sense of the force applied, not our sense of our centre of gravity moving outside our stable base. This is shown majestically in Tim Cartnell's videos on throwing (search effortless combat throws on youtube), and we should all be encouraged in this art of minimal effort, maximum results – something that Mark drums into us, week in and week out.

If my 10-week-old dog can do it, surely so can we.

Tai Chi from the ground up... part 1

Your "root" is already there for you. You don't have to "learn" how to get it — just stop fighting gravity!

Attributed to Cheng Man Ching

Professor Cheng is said to have told students to work with the idea of gravity and consider how it acts upon you. It is our job to achieve the alignment through the body that creates the correct structure to distribute the load most effectively. Some say we should 'claw' at the ground to gain connection and even 'paint it up' by stating that we are activating the 'bubbling well' by pulling up this point. The fact is although you may increase the awareness of this point by pulling it in, by the tension you have created, you will most certainly sever the natural connect that exists; Lao Tzu said nature is simple we make it complicated, and this is a prime example...

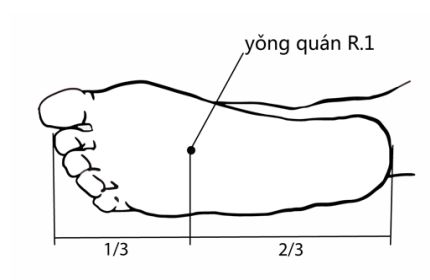
Everything in Tai Chi Chuan from standing post to combat is designed to harness your connection with the ground; we have evolved within a specific gravitational field that acts upon everything we do and are, by aligning ourselves effectively with it we can access and harness intrinsic power. Hey, remember the Superman films where he was incredibly strong because his home worlds gravitational field was far more powerful than that of earth... (Unfortunately, I can't fly, nor do I have x-ray eyes). Fantasy aside, physical proof of the effects of gravity can be found in astronauts where loss of bone density has been recorded following time spent in gravity free space; in addition to this, muscles and tissues waste away as they are not in use to the degree designed.

The basis of this article is to discuss the concept of structural alignment and the effects of gravity. I will introduce some of the games we play in our club and look at problems with kicks etc. The aim is not to lay down definitive rules but to open discussions and consider a few concepts.

Many schools have their own **Standing Post (Zhang Zhong) postures** but for ease we will discuss the simplest, which most will know as **Wu Chi**. This involves standing in a relaxed posture with feet shoulder width and arms relaxed by your sides. Try and feel a line through your body from the Pai-Hui point (crown of your head) through your Dan Tien and into the Yong-Quan point in your feet. Let the body hang as if suspended from the Pai-Hui point and try to feel as if everything is stacked underneath like building blocks. The building blocks must be in just the right place to allow gravity to act upon them and for them not to be unstable. Now stand for a few minutes with you eyes closed, joints soft (not locked) and weight evenly distributed. Feel the ground with the **WHOLE** contact area of your feet. Feel the effect of gravity acting upon you; do not resist by stiffening up and bracing your body, just relax and let the structure do the rest. Search your body with your minds eye looking for slight misalignments and imbalances, and gently adjust. This alignment exercise helps to develop whole body awareness and build the compressive resilient energy called Pung (ward-off). Pung is the first, and most important, of the eight methods trained in Tai Chi Chuan. Discussions of the eight methods and five steps are beyond the scope of this article and are readily available in many books including 'Tai Chi

Touchstones by Douglas Wile'. Remember '**structural alignment allows relaxation to occur**'. Putting the body into imbalance (or misalignment) causes the muscles to devote some of their energy to trying to regain and maintain balance. The ensuing tension affects not only the body but also the mind causing distractions and extraneous thought processes.

Practicing slowly allows you to pay attention to every little detail of every aspect of every movement; it allows you to 'live in the moment' and pay attention to that moment rather than already thinking about and rushing to the next. I always break movement from one posture to the next into 3 simple stages: 1) step and ensure the ground is good beneath your foot 2) transfer your weight and align with gravity to ensure your balance is correct 3) turn about your new axis. Rushing this process is a common occurrence and people wonder why they are not balanced or their knee hurts or the waist movement has no power. Try it! Move how you normally would, then do it again and pay attention to the 3 stages; if you think you, did it correctly, great, but when you turned did your knee move sideways? Did you feel your weight move in your foot? When you are about to turn, your hip/waist joint should already be lined up with your knee and foot... If it is, great again, I'll come to your class. Remember this article is called 'from the ground up', what I am attempting to do is build a structural awareness from the ground up.



Focussing on the Yong-Quan as specific points is as much a danger as it is a benefit if you do not understand what you are aiming for and what the underlying principle is; an example if this is if you focus on connecting the Yong-Quan point to the ground too much, you could empty the heel and toes thereby destabilising the longitudinal and transverse arches, this in turn could destabilise the knee and create excessive muscle tension as well as joint wear. Cheng Man Ching's comments cannot be overlooked here; when asked by a student "when will my legs stop aching", he replied "when you stop improving". Correct alignment allows the muscles to release any unnecessary tension, this release releases weight, previously held up, to fall naturally to the supports below the most apparent of which are the major leg muscles.....

Our initial response to loading a leg is to tighten the muscles to 'ready them' for the task at hand. This tightening is wasteful of energy and unnecessary, as everything exists within the body to perform the function automatically and in a relaxed manner. Research has shown that the function of the arch is as a shock absorber, essential not just while moving but also while stationary to take the first stage of loading. The spring ligament (plantar calcaneonavicular) as its name implies offers a springy support and is the main element for the structure of the arch under normal load conditions. Research by Basmajian and

Stecko (1963), and Gomez-Pellico and Llanos-Alcazar (1976) showed that ligaments gave the initial support and muscles such as the Peroneus Longus gave additional support only as the load increased. As boring as this might sound, what it proves is muscle activity (let alone tension) is hardly required to support your mass so why waste the effort..... We stand on our legs most of the time and pay little attention to what's going on, but as soon as an external load is applied by somebody pushing against us, doing squats with weights etc., we start to resist and unnecessarily over-activate our muscles. The function of our mind is what makes the difference, try to imagine receiving the additional load rather than resisting or pushing back against it and notice the difference in muscle activity; work with a partner to gain greater feedback. Remember receiving doesn't mean run away from, it means to accept and make it part of you, or 'blend with'.

The next area of the body to look at is the pelvis. The muscles in and around this area are large and difficult to relax. One of my students is an osteopath and told me that more than 50% of his business involves working on problems due to tensions in the pelvis region. Most people are unaware of the amount of tension they hold; when we practice the loosening taught within our club you can see the gradual freeing and relaxation in this area more than any other; the exercises were originally developed by Huang Shyan Shen, a leading disciple of Cheng. Remember the Tai Chi classic, "The waist is the commander". The best analogies I have come up with to describe this area are 'like a free running ball-bearing race' and 'like a ships compass, free and self-levelling in all directions. When you first feel it release, it is astounding; suddenly the whole body has a new feeling of freedom. The release allows a new level of sinking (or grounding) which increases your feeling of connection to the ground. A friend of mine has been practicing martial arts for 20 years and believed he was relaxed and fluid, that his training in Wing Chun and Filipino arts had taught him to flow with ease and power. But when he started push-hands with us he said he felt like wood. He tired quickly and had trouble getting a reference to strike from while I was inside his guard before he had chance to respond. It wasn't because I was better only that his speed was from upper body power and the flow stopped at his waist. Once he started practicing the waist loosening exercises, he had newfound power and speed (unfortunately for me...), but luckily, he is still to discover his root. It is useful to know that the word 'waist' in English does not have the same meaning as that used in Chinese, in respect Tai Chi. A clearer translation would be hip/waist which refers the leg to pelvis joint known as the Qua or inguinal canal. Ankles, hips, wrists, and shoulders are ball and socket whereas knees and elbows are hinge joints. If you think about this, to gain the freest movement in all direction's joints should be kept roughly at midpoint. As tension is released and the body relaxes you will find that your joints will naturally rest near to their midpoint and correctly align with each other. From here, let the muscles etc of the midsection relax and drop to free all areas in and around the pelvis region. Now move to the upper body...

When students first come to our classes, we say 'relax the shoulders' so much that the usual comment is they feel their shoulders are in their ears. Most of us have always been told,

as far back as school, to ‘stand tall, shoulders back and chest out’, unfortunately this causes tension, restricts movement, and effects natural function. The classics say, “Sink the chest and pluck the back” which when taken literally can cause hunching, not necessarily as bad as Quasimodo but still bad posture. By releasing the body and allowing it to naturally hang down, there is a natural sinking of the chest that in turn causes a natural filling or plucking of the back. Remember ‘natural’ not forced. The classics say we should be ‘**as if suspended from above**’ but I feel this would be clearer if it read ‘**as if suspended from above on a piece of suitable strength elastic**’. I shouldn’t think they had bungee jumping back then, or even those toy spiders that hang on elastic, so it needs a little expanding to allow analogies from our time to give a clearer reference. Try this out – imagine your body is hanging from a piece of suitable strength elastic attached to the crown of your head, then imagine you are suspended by a piece of cord instead – can you feel the buoyancy needed for free movement with the elastic or does it feel a little dead or stilted with the cord? Sinking the chest allows the breath to fall and the sensation of ‘hanging down’ to improve. What I mean by allowing the breath to fall is that there is a sensation of sinking inside the body whereby the breath appears to be pulled in and down by your stomach rather than feeling all chesty i.e., pulled in by the expansion of your chest. What is happening is that you are using your diaphragm and therefore activating more of your lung capacity. Most of us usually breathe with our chest and only use the top third of our lungs; this is only really apparent to those suffering from Asthma or anxiety attacks, which cause a feeling of tightness of the chest. Once mastered, abdominal breathing allows deeper natural breathing, which in turn improves oxygenation to the blood, which in turn increases oxygen to the organs, which in turn improves their function and so on...

I was always taught drop the shoulders, raise the hands, and imagine there was a weight hanging from the elbows. The visualisation of the weight helps to drop the shoulders but can also cause tension if the joints are not positioned properly. The outline of this is stated in the ‘Yang Family 12-character motto’

“Extend the elbows outward; leave a hollow in the armpits. The elbows pull down the tops of the shoulders, connect the wrists and carry along the fingers.”

(Yang Zhenduo, Yang Shih Taiji, 1997).

The positioning of the elbow opens the shoulder and allows the joint to fall into place; from here the hand can sit virtually on top of the wrist as favoured by Cheng Man Ching. I really like an idea developed by Peter Ralston that he calls ‘**hand up - you down**’ whereby as you raise your hand you have the sensation that everything else is falling/sinking down; awareness of your body is needed to allow you to feel and release or ‘drain away’ any tensions. Maybe this is the feeling Cheng had when he dreamt that his arms were broken, then when he woke nobody could defeat him. These ideas are designed to release any predisposition to use muscular force of the arm, rather than alignment with the ground, to apply power through compression. In fact, in application, you do not hit your target, you simply put yourself in the way and let the alignment between the target and the ground do the work. This is sometimes a hard concept to grasp as why would anybody walk onto a strike, but if you

consider in attacking, they have to come towards you, simplistically all you have to do is put yourself in the right place and be correctly aligned; the difference is in the thought process between an attack and a gift – all attacks are gifts because the attacker is committing themselves – but this is another article in itself...

The above areas need to be worked with and developed in a stationary position before we work with the principles of movement described in part 2.

*The tai chi & qigong union for Great Britain produces the “**Tai Chi & Internal Arts Journal**” and it is now available online at: www.taichimag.org for FREE
You can also buy and/or subscribe to printed copies by following the link online*



Are you interested in qigong workshops?

I am running 3-hour sessions live on zoom on

Thursdays 1-4pm for £30

January was Ba Duan Jin, March Yang Family Qigong.

Both were well attended and feedback great.

Next session will be

Thursday 12th May – Tai Chi Ruler



Advanced monthly training sessions.

Sessions are held each month for 3 hours at Weoley Hill Village Hall, Bournville, to enable instructors time for their own training and for more advanced students to gain the time to develop a deeper understanding of the application of tai chi.

Sessions are Sunday’s 9.30-12.30 at £30 per person.

2022 dates

April 10th

May 8th

June 12th

September 3rd & 4th (weekend camp)

Oct 9th

Nov. 20th

Dec. 4th

