



Tai Chi Newsletter

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call: 0121 251 6172

e-mail us: markpeters@kaiming.co.uk

Many of us are missing our tai chi classes, the social interaction, the thoughtful practice and even the playful banter. I have received calls asking when we will be starting up again and even “why can’t we have park classes?” Truth is, this lockdown has stopped us meeting face-to-face to practice, but has not stopped us working on our own understanding of the form function and philosophy of tai chi.

This month’s issue has some observations and thoughts from fellow students and instructors. Please read, reflect and develop your mindful practice of the wonderful arts of tai chi and qigong. I look forward to you sharing your thoughts and ideas. Please email contributions to markpeters@kaiming.co.uk

Government guidelines can be found at www.gov.uk/coronavirus



Constant Bear

Constant Bear is the Tai Chi activity I enjoy the most – and the one from which I think I derive the most benefit. This deceptively simple exercise was devised by Cheng Man Ching who said, “all of the principles that one needs to know about Tai chi are embedded in the practice of Constant Bear.”

But when you look at the various demonstrations of Constant Bear on the internet you can get very confused. You can see instructors telling

us to forget about the arms, just let them swing as you go from side to side faster and faster. Looks very much like a demonic warm up. Then there are those who never mention transfer of weight at all or, more alarmingly to me, advise us to keep the weight in the leg you are turning away from.

Thankfully, there are other demonstrations that are just like what we practise in Kai Ming. In one of these, the teacher tells us how, in the doing Bear, chi flows up our through the body as you do each turn. I don’t know much about chi, but I do know how this exercise makes me feel. For a start I feel, more powerful, more in control, more confident. To me, the positive mental effect is as a physical one. I read on the internet that Cheng Man Ching, himself a physician, recommended it for those with illnesses of various kinds. This struck a chord with me, as I shall explain, but I have to set a little context first.

Twenty years ago I was lying in a bed in a mens surgical ward, having had my large bowel removed a few weeks before. You might wonder why I was still there when today the pressure on bed places is so great. Hard to believe now, but this hospital at the time had the reputation of being both difficult to get into and hard to get out of. This operation had been unforeseen and the drugs that I had been given made healing a slow process. You might think it would be all down to the doctors saying, “You can go home now;” but it was clear that just as important was the opinion of the nursing staff. There was a kind of group conflagration every day in the middle of the ward involving medics and nurses. You couldn’t help overhearing some of it, especially when your name was mentioned. The magic words you wanted to hear was when the nurse said you were able to take care of yourself. So we tried to impress on them

that, indeed, we were capable of self-care, by shaving every day, by using the shower, looking smart and smiling a lot. You hoped for the best.

One day, there was a guy lying on the bed next to mine. His operation had been a few days earlier but I knew no more than that as he never spoke to anyone. I guessed from his appearance he could have been from a far eastern country. This day, he got off the bed, found a space and started to do what I now know was Tai Chi. I didn’t know what it was but know I think it must have been a QiGong of some kind. It went on for some minutes, you could have heard a pin drop and all eyes were on him. The he finished and lay down again on his bed, the faintest of smiles on his lips. Next day he was off home.

Of course, I got out of there eventually, having to wear a colostomy bag. After a time, people with this condition are offered the opportunity to have the operation “reversed”, ie a pouch is formed inside the body and nobody knows what you’ve got. For the majority of patients that’s it – two big ‘procedure’ as they call them. Unfortunately for me I was not be a part of that happy majority. To cut a long story short, I have ended up with the bag again, permanently this time. Why is this relevant? Because it takes me to the point where I can explain how Tai Chi, and in particular, Constant Bear, have been so important for me – and it was the guy in the next bed that started me off.

There have been times in our monthly training sessions when instructors have said, “Stand up straight” and I answer, “I am standing straight”, or “Relax” – “I am relaxed”. I know this is common to all of us. We don’t see ourselves as others see us. But if you have had several ‘procedures’ on the same part of the

body, a defensive posture, perhaps also a defensive state of mind, become ingrained. That is how you coped years ago, always having a hand or arm ready to fend people off if there was any danger of them bumping into you. Standing in such a way as to minimise the bump on the side of the abdomen. Over time it seems natural and more comfortable to move and stand like this. . It's the new you. It's only when we do something like Constant Bear that you see the possibility of a different 'you', not quite the same as the old one, perhaps better in some ways.

It's not a one-off. Tai Chi is a journey I think. But for me this exercise demonstrates how closely mind and body are connected. You stand and move in a controlled powerful way and you feel more powerful, but at the same time calmer and more energized, despite the slowness of the movements. It's so hard to put this into words, because, I think, it is an experience. In a gym, you can be pounding away at the equipment while your mind is on anything else. Usually, I find you are desperate to think of something else to take your mind off what you are doing. But in Constant Bear there is no such division between physical and mental – you feel your mind and body growing together.

I would say, if all you can do is one thing, do this one.

By John Shortall,
Junior Instructor Lichfield



A journey to find balance in my tai chi

After training in Bournville I get home, to Lancaster, almost in tears. Head spinning with "I don't even know what tai chi is any more".

For years I've been studying what I believe to be a highly disciplined martial art that demands sacrifice, pain and endurance. I take on teaching and find groups that expect a doughnut break between sitting dreaming about rivers and gently swaying from side to side. I find it hard to teach these students with what I believed tai chi to be. So I come to Birmingham and train in seated tai chi for rehab and find a teacher teaching me to help people dream about rivers while they sway their hands from side to side, with, unbelievably, a doughnut break. And I'm the carrot in the blender, resisting the blade that wants to make me smooth, crashing against plastic cage, away for a while and then back again...and again, and again and again. And each time I come home I'm in confusion. What is tai chi? I'm wondering? Maybe I get it now.

Taiji is a philosophy, a way of life, a 4000 year old heritage. It is to be respected, honoured and upheld. Taijiquan is a martial art born maybe 500 years ago but traceable to Yang Lu Chan and the Chen family and upheld by martial artists as controversial as Erle Montague, or the more respected Wang Xiangzhai, the founder of Yiquan who criticises negatively everyone's taiji with the exception of the Yang Cheng Fu.

Cheng Man Ching has done great work in creating a bridge that takes us from taiji to taijiquan to tai chi...a muscular skeletal exercise that stimulates a patient or student into practice. I study taijiquan but I teach tai chi and were it not for my experiences training with Mark in Birmingham, I do not know how I would have coped. It has been the difference between me getting it wrong to getting it right. I can cope with students laughing and playing with balloons because you made this ok to teach.

I'm going to miss you all as I won't be able to come to Kai Ming's classes for a while. The lockdown made me realise that I've been working too hard. I want to change that in my life and gain a better balance.

I'm writing here to thank you all. I would like to name names but fear I may miss someone out.

You have taught me so much and I am so very grateful. It's not been easy; you

weren't always nice! But we're not supposed to be. We're supposed to be honest, helpful and challenging, not just nice and placating. You were demanding of me and I appreciate that as well.

Thank you all for helping me to learn that a man with multiple sclerosis does not need the punishment of taijiquan, he needs the gentleness of tai chi. But I still don't let 'em have doughnuts in class.

By Larry Jones.



WHY DO PEOPLE CRASH THROUGH DOORS?

This is just a short observation.

Recently I was waiting for Lynne at the entrance to Ankerside, a shopping mall in Tamworth, and as you do when you are not doing anything in particular, I started people watching.

I was amazed at how many people seemed to crash through the doors into the shopping mall, not literally, but just stuck their arm out like a rigid rod and ploughed through the door. I thought they must have lots of shoulder and arm aching muscles through doing this, as I am sure, they do it all the time.

Now if they applied the principles of Tai Chi, as we are all taught, they should connect with the door, relax the wrist, relax and bend the elbow and then connecting to the ground calmly walk through the door, therefore causing no stress or damage to the arm and shoulder. If only everyone could take up Tai Chi, just imagine 100 people doing Tai Chi in Tamworth Castle Grounds on the main lower lawn.

But that's another story, maybe a plan for after the lockdown.

By John Jenkins, Instructor Tamworth

The World

They said the world was closed today
So I went to have a look,
I found it with the shutters down
And the phone was off the hook.

So I stood there for a little while
But no one was around,
Then silence came and startled me
With the most alarming sound.

I asked him where the others were,
And why the streets were bare.
He whispered 'Life had ran away
While death was playing there'

'Oh no' I said 'It can't be true
For life is not afraid'
'But no one ever goes' he said
'Where death has ever played.'

I understood and walked away
As Hope was standing there
With Courage in her afterglow
And the sunlight in her hair.

She said 'Go home to those you love
This is no place to be,
For if we walk these streets today
Then no one shall be free'.

She threw her light to lead the way
And showed me where to go,
The very road that life had gone
Where the future flowers grow.

Then death showed me another way
But I didn't want to look,
So I stumbled home in time for tea
And I read another book.

It was called 'The World is Closed
Today
And the streets we shouldn't roam',
The first line said 'Just please be safe'
And the ending - 'Stay at Home'
.....stay safe.

Anon

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 warm up exercises (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 endomorphines. Production of endomorphines 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 endomorphines, 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.

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. People will notice that as they practise Tai Chi, and for that matter any other self-defence art, they will be more aware of what they eat and drink. One hopes that those practising the art will realise the futile habit of smoking.

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 on the web site:

<http://www.kaiming.co.uk/>

Under the title: "**Tai Chi Reduces Falls in the Elderly by Half.**"

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.

The basis of Chinese Medicine is the balance of Yin and Yang, the same has great significance for Tai Chi. There has been much research in Tai Chi and Health and the benefits have been proven through vigorous scientific methodology.

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