



# Painting the Rainbow Newsletter

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

## Community Based Tai Chi & Chi-Kung for everyone

*Improvement cannot always be measured, it is something you feel*

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### **Mindfulness: what is it, why do we need it, how do I get it?**

Mindfulness - what is it? Mindfulness is a form of meditation that is done in everyday life. It is a calm mental state of awareness of the body's functions (such as breathing, movement, touch, sound, sight) and the content of our conscious thoughts. It focuses on experience within the mind at the present, as opposed to thinking about the future or the past. It is also removed from disconnected, random trains of thought (I've left the gas on. What if people don't like me? Does my bum look big in this?). It improves clarity of mind and leads to a new understanding of the world and our place in it. In tai chi, we obtain mindfulness by doing, i.e. in form practice and related exercises. Outside the class, we extend mindfulness into our routine lives, be it doing the washing up, walking the dog, or writing an essay.

Why do we need it? I think cultivating mindfulness is one of the most important benefits of tai chi. Many people struggle with the concept because it is alien to the way we have been brought up. Modern western society focuses on the material and creates little opportunity for relaxed contemplation. We spend our lives constantly on the go. Our senses are bombarded with verbal and visual stimuli that have no connection with the

natural world and which manipulate, lead or influence our behaviour: TV, radio, newspapers, advertising, traffic etc. It's really hard to process all this information and as a result it soon comes to dominate our mind state. Modern life is characterised by the pursuit of material wealth and the desire to elevate our status above others in our peer group. In a global society, these needs can never be satisfied, leading to anxiety, stress and a loss of meaning. It's hard enough being alive as it is. The human condition is characterised by existential angst and a fear of death; we've got enough on our plates already without worrying about material possessions and status.

As a result, our external lives swamp the internal life. We have no connection with nature. We have little self-knowledge and little chance of achieving it in a culture that frowns upon self-improvement. Conversations have little meaning or substance; everyone's talking and no one's listening. In short, we have no time to stop and smell the flowers.

One reason tai chi is amazing is that it can, in its own way, address these issues. It can help cultivate mindfulness and thereby remove us from the external stresses of life. It allows us to experience being in the moment.

Tai chi is 'multifunctional': it is a martial art that is also a philosophy; it improves physical and mental health. It's not an answer to life's challenges but it is a tool that can help us. In our world, there is little chance of ever having to use tai chi as defence against physical attack, but it has everyday use as self-defence against attack from modern society. The beauty of it is that the different components of tai chi are inextricably linked. Thus you

may use it every day to benefit mental wellbeing, but one day it may also help you if you're mugged in the street.

So my argument is that by practicing tai chi, we can start to dispose of the mental garbage in our heads and connect with the real world, the natural world of which we are an inherent part. To me, it's mind blowing that a set of ostensibly simple movements and principles can help us achieve this. I am convinced that all people who come to tai chi classes will benefit from mindfulness.

How do we get it? I don't think you can start bombarding people in a class with teaching on mindfulness. The concepts are alien to most people brought up in our society and there's a good chance you'd scare them away. And you can't make people become mindful. But because it's inherent to tai chi, it can be introduced by stealth. You can prepare the ground and then mindfulness will happen.

According to Chuckrow (Tai Chi Book, 1998), mindfulness is a direct mode of mind, in which we experience through senses rather than through words. Therefore, we can bring in three activities in class:

1. During form practice, keep the class calm and quiet. Encourage students to open their internal and external senses; to be aware of their movement, their body position, of the pressure on their feet, the sights and sounds around them, the movement of the air on their hands as they go from one position to another. This is probably best done in short bursts using simple movements that students don't have to think about. Remember, mindfulness is relaxed awareness and doing.

2. Encourage students to be aware of the internal commentary that runs in their heads while doing the form. Don't attempt to suppress it or pass judgement on it, just be aware of it. Let thoughts and feelings come and go,

3. Finally, suggest to students that they can extend this active meditation to everyday life, for example, when doing the washing up, feel the water and soap bubbles on your skin, listen to the sounds of the water and the noise of the plates, look at the way the sunlight falls on the bubbles. Learn to recognise the feelings and the clarity of mind that result. Then let it go. Don't force yourself to be mindful, just do it.

The best example I have is when I go surfing. When you catch a wave and stand on the board, time stands still. All you focus on is your balance and movement with the wave, and all your senses are filled with the sounds, feel and smell of the sea.

One of the big challenges is how to cope with people who come to class for a chat, gossip and a night out. These people subconsciously close their minds to learning; I find it particularly frustrating when you have someone who says they can't remember how to do a move in the form, but then won't practice it in class during individual practice sessions and instead wanders off to look at a newsletter or chat with their mates. I guess in its own respect this is fine, people are free to do what they want, but it can disrupt the rest of the class. How would I deal with this? I think that if I saw it happening, I would bring the class together to work under my direction and cultivate focus on the movement; mindful practice. There are times for mindful practice and times for mental free-play; making the conscious choice is key to mental freedom.



## **Tai Chi and Chiropractic: what can we learn?**

Humans are among the few animals that move though the world in an upright position. This position puts stresses on the spine not experienced by four-legged animals. The natural curves in our spines are thus important in providing shock absorption and structural integrity during upright, seated and standing activities.

Many people are unaware that as humans we have three natural spinal curves that are formed in early childhood. We are born with one continuous C-shaped curve. As infants, when we begin to raise our heads, and later, when we push up on our hands and crawl, the concave (or lordotic) curves of the neck (the cervical spine) and low back (the lumbar spine) are formed. The convex curve of the mid-back where the ribs attach (the thoracic spine) is left over from the original C-shaped curve. Please note that some children walk before crawling and never develop the spinal curves. The person with the resulting straight spine, referred to as a 'military spine', is prone to neck and back problems as well as headaches related to structural stress.

A healthy lower back depends on good spinal structure, unrestricted joint range of motion, maintenance of the lumbar curve, and the support of sufficiently strong low-back and abdominal muscles. The practice of good posture when standing and sitting, along with daily exercise to maintain muscle tone and joint movement, will help to reduce the chance of low-back injury.

During in tai chi practice, preserving a natural and relaxed lumber curve can enable the student to achieve greater flexibility and fluidity of movement due to the resulting freedom in hip range of motion. When we slouch we end up 'hanging' on our ligaments and our muscles have to work harder to hold us up. If we instead, take advantage of our natural spinal structure for support, and allow the opposing muscle groups to balance each other, then achieving relaxation in standing and sitting becomes possible. If we accept that tai

chi is a system of musculoskeletal rehabilitation then we must accept that it would not work against correct function but rather enhance it. Prof. Cheng has been often quoted as saying "form without function is no form at all" so let's look to consider that form practice is to develop relaxed (natural) and co-ordinated movement; it is to prepare us for the stresses and strains of daily life, both physically and psychologically. Its martial function is based on the Taoist concepts of none-resistance and natural action so to apply it effectively we must harness our intrinsic strength and structure whilst taking advantage of weaknesses in our opponent. I spend much of my time, these days, teaching tai chi for patient rehabilitation. The only real difference between applying tai chi as a martial art or as a system of rehabilitation is rebalancing rather than off-balancing the person you're working with.

Real isn't how you are made...it's a thing that happens to you.

When somebody loves you for a long, long, time, not just to play with but REALLY loves you, then you become real.

FROM the Velveteen Rabbit,  
by Margery Williams (1922).

Here at Painting the Rainbow our aim is to make tai chi and chi-kung as accessible to everyone as possible. With this in mind Mark trains staff in tai chi for patient rehabilitation at local hospitals; patients can then be referred on to our community based classes across the city.

Class run on local churches and community centres as well as local parks, all of which can be found on the website

[www.paintingtherainbow.co.uk](http://www.paintingtherainbow.co.uk)

If you know of someone who could benefit please let them know. If you know of a group or centre who could benefit, please let them know and pass on our details.

Jenny and Mark can be easily contacted via the website or on **0121 251 6172**