

Kai Ming Association Newsletter

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Finding Calm in a Busy World: How Tai Chi, Qigong and Biophilia Help Me Make Sense of Anxiety and Depression

Over the years, both in my own life and in my work with students and clients, I've come to see anxiety and depression not just as conditions to "fix," but as signals. Signals that something in our system—body, mind, or environment—is out of balance.

And if I'm honest, I don't think modern life makes that balance easy.

We live indoors more than ever. We move less. We think more. We're constantly stimulated yet often feel disconnected—especially from ourselves. So it's no surprise that anxiety and depression have become so common.

What I've found, time and again, is that some of the most effective solutions are also the simplest. For me, that comes down to three things: Tai Chi, Qigong, and our connection to nature—what's known as **biophilia**.

What Do I Mean by Biophilia?

The term *biophilia* was popularised by the biologist Edward O. Wilson in the 1980s. Quite literally, it means "**love of life**" (Greek) or "**love of living systems**."

But in practical terms, it describes something very human: We are wired to feel better when we are connected to nature. Not in a vague or poetic sense—but biologically, neurologically, and emotionally.

Biophilia suggests that:

- Our nervous systems evolved in natural environments
- We respond positively to natural patterns—trees, water, open landscapes
- Disconnection from nature can contribute to stress and low mood

You can see it in everyday life. People feel calmer near water. They relax in green spaces. Even having plants in a room can change how someone feels.

So when I talk about biophilia in the context of anxiety and depression, I'm really talking about **reconnecting with the environments we're designed for**.

It Starts With the Body

One of the biggest shifts in my understanding came when I stopped seeing anxiety as purely "mental."

When someone tells me they feel anxious, I don't just hear thoughts—I see a body that's on high alert.

- Breathing becomes shallow
- Shoulders lift and tighten
- The nervous system stays stuck in "fight or flight"

Depression, on the other hand, often shows up as the opposite:

- Low energy
- Heaviness in the body
- Disconnection and withdrawal

So rather than trying to think our way out of these states, I've found it far more effective to **work through the body**. That's where Tai Chi and Qigong come in.

Why Tai Chi and Qigong Work So Well

When I teach Tai Chi or Qigong, I'm not just teaching movement. I'm helping people relearn how to regulate themselves.

The movements are slow, deliberate, and connected to the breath. At first glance, they can seem almost too simple—but that's exactly the point.

Slowing things down gives the nervous system a chance to reset. I often see it happen within minutes:

- Breathing deepens naturally
- The shoulders begin to drop
- The mind becomes quieter without forcing it

What's important here is that people don't have to *try* to relax. The practice creates the conditions for relaxation.

Getting Out of the Head (Without Fighting the Mind)

One of the biggest challenges with anxiety is overthinking. People often say to me:

"I just can't switch my mind off."

And I understand that. Trying to force the mind to stop usually makes it more active.

What Tai Chi and Qigong offer instead is a shift in attention. Rather than stopping thoughts, we give attention somewhere else to go:

- Into the feeling of movement
- Into the rhythm of the breath
- Into balance and coordination

It's a gentle redirection, not a battle.

And over time, that creates space—space where thoughts lose their intensity.

Where Biophilia Comes Alive

This is where things really start to come together.

I've taught the same practices in halls, studios, and outdoors—and the difference is striking.

When we step outside into a natural environment, something changes almost immediately.

People often don't notice it consciously at first, but you can see it:

- Their posture softens
- Their breathing settles more quickly
- Their attention widens

This is biophilia in action.

Nature provides what researchers sometimes call **“effortless attention.”** Enough is happening to engage the mind - movement of leaves, sounds of birds, shifting light - but not so much that it overwhelms.

It allows the nervous system to downshift without effort.

Why the Combination Is So Effective

Tai Chi and Qigong regulate the internal system.

Nature regulates the external environment.

Put them together, and you create a powerful feedback loop.



As I move slowly and breathe deeply:

- The body begins to calm
- The environment reinforces that calm
- The mind follows

And that's a big shift, especially for people who feel like they've been struggling for a long time.

A Different Way of Looking at Anxiety and Depression

What I've come to appreciate is that this approach changes the conversation.

Instead of asking:

“How do I get rid of anxiety or depression?”

We start asking:

“How do I bring myself back into balance?”

That includes:

- The body (movement and breath)
- The mind (attention and awareness)
- The environment (connection to nature)

When those three elements begin to align, things often improve naturally.

What This Looks Like Day to Day

This isn't about adding something complicated to life.

It's about making small, consistent shifts.

For example:

- A short Qigong routine in the morning
- Practising Tai Chi in a local park instead of indoors
- Taking a few minutes to notice your surroundings—trees, sky, air

Even brief exposure to nature, combined with mindful movement, can make a noticeable difference.

What I See in Practice

Over time, I see people begin to change in very real ways.

They often tell me:

- They feel calmer without trying
- Stress doesn't build as quickly
- They recover faster when things do go wrong
- They feel more connected—to themselves and the world around them

And importantly, they feel less stuck.

Being Grounded About It

I'm not suggesting this replaces therapy or medical support where needed.

But what Tai Chi, Qigong, and biophilia offer is something that many people are missing:

A way to actively support their own well-being.

They are:

- Accessible
- Sustainable
- Low risk

And they work with the body, not against it.

A Final Thought

If there's one thing I've learned, it's this:

We're not separate from the systems that support us.

We are part of them.

Tai Chi and Qigong help us reconnect internally.

Nature reconnects us externally.

And somewhere in that reconnection, people often find what they've been looking for:

Not just relief - but a sense of balance, calm, and belonging again.

By Mark Peters



My Journey From the Back of the Class to the Front

WOW! What a long walk it has been, and a lot of hard work, commitment, frustration, tears and hitting the hard floor so many times over the years, when grading OUCH!

My journey in Tai Chi started way back in the 1990's (when I was in my mid-fifties), a bit late you might think to start, but I saw an advert in my local paper offering Tai Chi classes and said this is what I would like to do, I did, and have never looked back (well maybe sometimes!)

For about 2/3 years I trained with a guy called Zak Lee, who was an instructor of Jason Chan, (sorry but this was my

introduction to Tai Chi). This class folded after about 3 years and a friend found another class in Tamworth, in Belgrave, which was a Kai Ming class run by a very competent instructor, John Bethel.



Joining this class was like starting all over again, as I had to unlearn the other form and learn the Cheng Man Ching 37 Step Form, (what am I doing, I thought) as at times it was very difficult, but I persisted. I do recall, though, after asking the instructor why I could not remember some of the moves, being told well at your age it gets more difficult to retain things. Needless to say, I was taken aback, (being polite here) and nearly left the group.

Later on I met Heather and Dave (Lichfield Instructors) who encouraged me to start training as a Junior Instructor, I resisted at first because I felt I would not be able to achieve it. At the same time though, I had commenced a course to become a Reflexologist and also started extra training with Mark. After a couple of years I made it, I became a Reflexologist and Junior Instructor at the age of 59, oh and also got married to John, so you see ladies it's never too late to start anything. I assisted in classes in Lichfield for a while and eventually qualified as an Instructor to be able to teach my own class, along with my husband John, who also became an Instructor.

Some of the best times have been spent at Unstone Grange Tai Chi weekends, where I have met lots of different characters and done some amazing training with instructors invited by Mark.

Imagine, if you can, getting up at 7am on a Saturday or Sunday morning to do Chi Kung in the early morning sunshine, or the drizzle. It was glorious, a great wake-up call. Sunday was always the hardest after our incredible Saturday night parties (John and I occasionally being the DJ's, something John did anyway). Never going to bed until 3am, leaving some of them to carry on until 5am, but we still managed to make it some Sunday mornings.

During the years that have followed, I have become a Grandmother and find that Tai Chi helps tremendously when dealing with children! Returned to college to do more Holistic Therapies.

Because of my interest in Holistic Therapies, I have also trained with Mark and Jenny as a Painting the Rainbow Instructor, which has added to, and expanded my knowledge and I look forward to doing a class.

Although I am at the front of the class these days, it is still an all-consuming experience and learning curve, as you constantly meet different people, who expect all sorts of things from Tai Chi.

The journey is far from over; there is still more to learn and hopefully many more students to teach. It's been one of the best times of my life, the knowledge I've gained has been invaluable, the friends I have found have made it an incredible journey – long may it continue.

By Lynne Jenkins - Senior Instructor - Tamworth

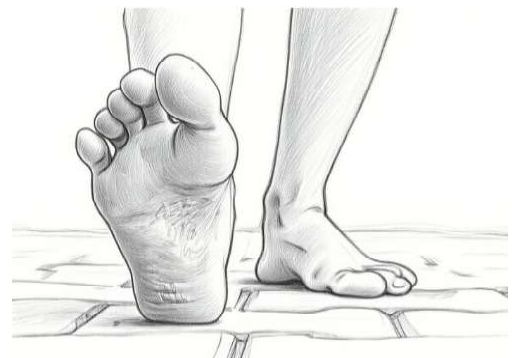
We hope Lynne's story will inspire others to train to be an instructor too.

Best Foot Forward - or is it !?

Feet have been at the centre of everyday conversation for centuries. "Starting off on the right/wrong foot"..... "Dipping one's toe in the water"..... "Caught on the back foot". Idioms involving 'feet' are endless. The phrase "putting one's best foot forward" was first recorded in 1613.

However, their actual role, their importance in terms of our balance, and the part they play in our everyday lives is mostly taken for granted.

How often do we think about what our "feet" are doing as we move through the Form? Do we think about what our feet are doing as we walk along a pavement, across a field or uneven ground, over a pebbled beach, as we go up or down a flight of stairs, as we change direction to cross a road?



Jenny Peters wrote an excellent article in the March 2026 issue of the Painting the Rainbow (PtR) newsletter discussing the essential part our feet play in balance and more, so I decided to 'focus' for a couple of weeks on 'feet awareness' as a theme in both PtR and Kai Ming classes.

Focusing the students to 'just think feet' as we carried out movements that they were very familiar with, e.g. Shibashi Set 1, or individual movements taken from the Form, and have the students concentrate on what was happening with their feet as they carried out the movement This exercise had a big impact.

What follows are some observations written by students from both my Kai Ming and PtR classes that they wish to share with the reader, to see if they ring any bells - on your toes!

"I've been learning Tai Chi and Qigong for roughly 18 months now, starting as a complete beginner. In that time, I've become more aware of my balance and the position of my feet during the Form and Qigong movements.

From weight distribution across the heel, dropping down right into the centre of my feet, and the position of my feet in different stances. I notice more where my weight is, how it shifts, and how small adjustments make a difference to balance during movement transitions. Thinking about my feet and weight distribution has slowed me down in a good way - less rushing, better control and more paying attention to how I move.

This isn't just about Tai Chi. The lessons learnt during classes have certainly made me more aware of how my feet move in day-to-day activities, from moving around the kitchen while making a cuppa or cooking, to working in the garden, and even walking and playing with my dog. The control and balance learned can very much be applied to life outside the class. I'm still very much a beginner, but definitely more in tune with it all than when I started. " - KM Student, Lichfield

"Weight balance has helped me with having had a hip replacement nearly 3 years ago, also a pin and plate in one ankle, which has made the joint unstable. Tai Chi has given me the ability to stand on one leg, to move my weight to balance myself, and given me back strength down my right-hand side, which I had totally lost from previous injury and surgery. Listening to instructions in class on how to move, I have learnt how to position my feet, transferring weight before lifting an object, heavy or otherwise. I use this manoeuvre many times in daily tasks. Especially gardening - lifting compost. Thank you, PtR Tai Chi "

- PtR Student, Lichfield

"Having been worried about my lack of balance for some time, I was very pleased to see the March newsletter regarding feet and balance. At the class, Heather also concentrated on our feet and balance. I couldn't believe it when I suddenly realised that at long last I could stand on one leg! What joy! I am now thinking much more about my feet when walking."

- PtR Student, Lichfield

"I have always loved walking, but now, in my nineties, I fully realise the importance of balance. When walking, I try to stabilise my feet - making sure I put my heels down first and rolling my feet as I walk forwards."

- PtR Student, Sacred Heart

"I joined our Tai Chi class nearly three years ago. I joined because I wanted help with my balance. In class, I learned how to sink/root and know how important it was for us to get it correct, placing this alongside correct breathing and relaxing the body. These things are now part of my everyday life, and I feel so much better. I must say I found the article in our March newsletter about feet so enlightening. I didn't realise how complex they are - and it explained the couple of problems I have with my right foot. Evidently, more Tai Chi is needed."

- PtR Student, Sacred Heart

By someone in stroke recovery... "Following the session focusing on my balance and where I place my weight on my feet, I found that for 2 days afterwards my walking improved. More practice will clearly help me - thanks again".

- PtR Student, Sacred Heart

"I assist in a plumbing and heating business and naturally have to carry heavy items such as radiators and boilers. As a result, I do get a bit of lower back pain. However, when I focus on ensuring that my weight is sinking through the centre of my feet and how they move as my body moves, my posture improves, and it becomes much easier to lift and move these heavy items, with no resulting back pain!"

- KM Student, Lichfield

"I find balance on one foot a challenge, so I practice by putting on trousers standing up, concentrating on keeping my weight 'in the centre' of my feet. Trying not to fall over - it works !"

- PtR Student, Lichfield

"Tai Chi has made me, over time, far more stable on my feet. I am more aware of how I walk and my posture in everyday activities. From balancing on one leg to reach for an object in a higher cupboard, to being aware of posture when in a queue, to walking very carefully on an icy path, to not slouching when pushing a shopping trolley. I recently had a physio appointment, and the Physiotherapist was impressed with how I stood balanced while doing seated squats - this I have picked up from Tai Chi. I love coming to Tai Chi - so glad I have found 'my thing' in terms of exercise and mental well-being.

- KM Student, Lichfield

I thank and congratulate all my students for the energy and commitment they have put into this focus on 'feet'. As instructors, we can explain and encourage 'rooting' and of how to achieve 'stability' without stiffness. How to position our feet for correct structural alignment. We can introduce the awareness of movement being initiated from the ground, up through the feet, channelled through the body, directed by the waist, up and out through the fingertips, rather than driven by the upper body and the arms - but do we emphasise the role of the feet as the primary source of balance?

Maybe if, as individuals, we start to be aware of what our big toe, the ball and heel, as well as the full sole, of our foot are doing when we move then maybe we will be 'putting our best foot forward' in its real sense!

By Heather Lomas - Chief Instructor - Tamworth

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 chuan.

Sessions are Sunday's 9.30-12.30 at £35 per person

For your diary, 2026 Sunday session dates:

May 10th
June 7th
July 5th
Aug 9th
September 13th – 9.30am to 4pm
Oct 11th
Nov 15th

