

## Newsletter Autumn 2009

### Taijiquan – the multi-faceted art

I must be honest with you, the reason I started taijiquan was because I had read that it was the ultimate martial art. Indeed in Chris Nicol's fine book *Moving Zen*, a Japanese karate master described it as a martial art for supermen. I liked the sound of that.

Now more than thirty years later. I know that there is no such thing as the ultimate martial art. I also know that taijiquan is indeed an effective martial art, but it is also so much more than that.

My first Chinese taijiquan teacher, Mr. Huang Jifu, always described taijiquan as postgraduate level martial arts. By that he meant that the lessons the art teaches are most suitable for those who have a firm grounding in some other martial art. To some extent I agree with him. But, even if you have no other martial arts experience there are important things you can learn from the art, even from your very first lesson.

One of the most important lessons the art has to offer, and one which continues to offer enormous benefits throughout your taijiquan career is the value of slowness.

How often in our lives do we just slow down and pay attention to not only what is going on around us but also to what is going on in both our body and mind?

Yet from our very first lesson we are taught to stand still, to pay attention to our breathing, to learn how our bodies move. Very often it is difficult for beginners to do even such simple things as keep their shoulders sunk, their elbows lowered, to keep a space under their armpits and so on. This is because we seldom, since childhood have to pay attention to our bodies. We have forgotten that "body vocabulary" which tells us where our elbows are in relation to our shoulders, or where our knees are in relation to our hips and feet. Slowly and steadily we have to learn these things again.

At the same time we relearn the vital connection between mind and body and how conscious integration of all the elements that make up the human being (body, mind and spirit) can really enhance the quality of our life.

And all of this comes from moving slowly and consciously while breathing deeply and relaxing so that the body may move naturally as it was designed to. Oh how easy those words were to type and yet how challenging it is to actually do what they describe!

That, however, is the beauty of taijiquan, for it is a lifelong journey that presents us with constant challenges but also constant rewards as we master each little step.

Earlier this year we had a visitor in Malaysia, Mr. Neil Bothwell, who at sixty years young, decided to commit himself to three monthss of study at our Training Centre. Neil is a veteran martial artist with a black belt in karate, who has been studying taijiquan for a number of years. With his "never say die" attitude it was obvious to me that Neil would give his all...and he did. In addition to training six hours a day Neil found time to keep us constantly entertained with stories of his colourful life and also to make friends with all of the villagers that he met.

One day, in a break from training, Neil expressed to me his sadness that this would be his last trip to Malaysia because of his age. I was astonished because, as I told him, this training was only the beginning. Neil was well on his way to earning his full instructor qualification and I would expect that in five years time he would be ready to test for Senior Instructor. He was surprised but I told him that many people have taken up taijiquan at what would be considered an advanced age, and gone on to become recognised as masters.

Neil went on to attain the qualification and before he left, expressed his intention of returning. During his time in Malaysia he worked as hard as people a third of his age and played even harder. It was not easy for him but his open-mindedness and desire to learn together with his willingness to work as hard as he could, guaranteed that he would make progress.

Neil is not the oldest Zhong Ding student by a long stroke and it is clearly evident that no matter what your age you can receive great benefits from the practice of taijiquan. These benefits, however, go far beyond the physical. Here in Malaysia many senior citizens join their taijiquan group for an hour or more of practice every morning. When training is finished they retire to local restaurants to eat breakfast together. Not only do they exercise but they also enjoy companionship and a circle of friends from diverse backgrounds.

In the UK the weather often prevents morning training and eating out is often not cheap or convenient. Our members, of all ages, however, do benefit from meeting each other not only in class but socially. In any taijiquan class people come from a wide range of backgrounds and have a wealth of experience. This experience is there to be shared with all in the group and is something that is valued by all. The sense of companionship and the satisfaction of walking down a path with like-minded people both add to the physical benefits of taijiquan training.

Research on the physical benefits has shown that taijiquan is an efficient method for restoring and maintaining good physical balance, aids the efficiency of the cardiovascular system, helps lower blood pressure and strengthen muscles and bones. Furthermore it does all this in a gradual and safe manner which allows those who have long been sedentary to exercise without fear of injury. ( <http://centerfortaiji.com/research/> & [http://www.byregion.net/articles-healers/TaiChi\\_Research.html](http://www.byregion.net/articles-healers/TaiChi_Research.html) )

Equally as important are the mental and spiritual benefits which ultimately cannot be separated from the purely physical. Taijiquan is a form of moving meditation; this means that during practice the mind is fully occupied not only on the physical movements but also on the appropriate "states" connections and coordinations which serve to unite body and mind. One such example of a "state" is that of all movement originating from the centre; another is distinguishing between substantial and insubstantial. Connections include such things as keeping the head suspended from above and aligning the hands and feet, knees and elbows and hips and shoulders. One part moves, everything moves is an example of the coordination required, while the mind moves first, the body follows is another. The latter teaching focuses specifically on the integration of mind and body in the movements of the form.

The emphasis on the "state" of "song" or relaxation with intent, promotes a deep level of coordination between mind and body and a mental awareness of the physical totality. This is put to use in developing tactile sensitivity (ting jing) through the practise of pushing hands and other two-person exercises.

On a more mundane level just the act of remembering the forms with all their technical requirements provides exercise and stimulation for the mind.

A great example of the benefits of practising taijiquan may be found in the person of Master Lau Kim Hong who, at the age of seventy five, continues to make progress. It is no exaggeration to say that every time I meet him he is researching new areas and refining old ones; and, by doing so, increasing his own skill levels. In particular, in recent years I have noticed how his ability to cut down the delay between intent and action has improved. In practical terms this means that, when you try to push him, he is able to intercept you almost at the time of your intent and before the act of pushing is fully initiated. Master Lau still goes running regularly, teaches daily and travels several hundred miles a week to give classes and seminars. In addition he is very active in his local community and as a member of his local Buddhist Temple.

Master Lau's own teacher, Master Lu Tong Bao did not start his own practice of taijiquan until the age of thirty seven. He was prompted to do so by his own ill-health, suffering as he was from heart problems, high blood pressure and diabetes. Within a decade he was renowned throughout Malaysia for his mastery of taijiquan as a martial art. So much so that on a visit to Singapore he was met by the man who was to become

leader of that country for decades, Lee Kuan Yew, who came to pay his respects to this man who had thousands of students.

Of course most of us are not going to rise to the heights of Master Lau or Master Lu but even so there is nothing to stop us from enjoying the riches that the art has to offer.

From the form we can learn about our bodies and how to enjoy the benefits of more efficient and "natural" physical structure. We can also learn about the role the body and mind both play in relaxation and "stillness".

From pushing hands we learn how to apply the form's lessons in structure and relaxation under pressure. At the same time we learn about how we relate to others, and how to deal with force and stress. Furthermore pushing hands provides us with an environment in which we can carefully control and gradually increase the amount of stress we are under.

Through participation in competition we learn more about our reaction to stress and are able to fine tune our practical use of relaxation in action.

Taijiquan's conditioning methods provide us with ever increasing challenges in terms of the use of both body and mind in accordance with taiji principles.

I realise, of course that I am preaching to the converted but is good, once in a while, to be reminded of the treasures we have in our very hands. In conclusion I hope to see many of you at the annual camp so that we can share our experience of this wonderful, multi-faceted art.

Details can be found on the website and are obtainable from your instructor. Please note there are many interesting activities available at all levels.

Until the next time train hard and have fun!

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