

April, 2012

Tai Chi and Meditation

Weimin Kwauk

Tai Chi is a slow movement martial arts form. It is based on the Chinese philosophical beliefs. Tai Chi is the origin of All Things before the change of Yin and Yang, or before the Creation.

“Tai” in Chinese, means highest, greatest, or remotest. “Chi” in this context, is the Chinese word for extreme, pole, or polarity, and does not connote the same “Chi” (a different Chinese word with similar pronunciation) that indicates the energy force inside you.

Different from many styles of fast-moving martial arts, Tai Chi is one of the so called inner martial arts that emphasizes the inside, the movement of Chi (the inner energy), mindful concentration, and a philosophical understanding of the Universe.

Just like the two sides of every coin, everything in the Universe contains Yin and Yang. Meditation has a calm form (Yin) as well as a moving form (Yang). If you have the opportunity to study both the calm and moving meditations, you will achieve more wide-ranging results since these forms use different approaches to reach a meditative state.

As a martial art, Tai Chi is based on the philosophical concept of Yin and Yang with each movement reflecting the change of Yin and Yang. A simple posture could produce many results. Ultimately, the harmony of Yin and Yang achieved through the practice of Tai Chi results in the harmony and balance of the internal Chi. Therefore, better health or self-healing can be achieved

Tai Chi's movement sequence has a martial arts background. Learning the martial arts techniques and the philosophical beliefs behind Tai Chi will help you understand meditation from a different perspective.

There are many styles of Tai Chi forms. The most common styles include: Chen, Yang, Wu, Sun, and others. Each one has its own distinguishable martial arts flavor.

The Tai Chi form which uses no weapon in hand is called the empty-hand form, or Tai Chi Chuan (or Quan). “Chuan” means fist in Chinese. Normally we use

the term “Chuan” together with “Tai Chi” to distinguish this form with a weapon form.

The most common weapon forms include: Tai Chi Sword, Tai Chi Broadsword and Tai Chi Spear as well as Tai Chi Cane, and Tai Chi Fan. Some people also practice Tai Chi Ball, Tai Chi Ruler, Tai Chi Horsetail Whisk and other forms using different weapons and instruments.

In a classical Tai Chi empty-hand form, there are eight basic techniques: Ward Off, Roll Back, Squeeze, Pushing, Grabbing, Split, Elbow, and Shoulder; and five basic movements: Forward, Retreat, Watch the Left, Guard the Right and Stabilize the Center. Putting together these eight basic techniques and five movements, Tai Chi was once called the "Tai Chi Thirteen Postures."

Different weapon forms of Tai Chi are more complicated in movement. For example, the most common sword form has thirteen basic techniques: Whipping, Pulling, Raising, Blocking, Striking, Piercing, Tapping, Kicking, Stirring, Pressing, Splitting, Intercepting and Cutting.

No matter which form you play, with or without weapons, you must learn to play it the "Tai Chi" way, putting into harmony your movement, breathing, and concentration to reach the meditation state, or the trance. Playing a fast movement martial arts form in slow motion is not playing Tai Chi; neither is playing a set of meaningless movements in slow motion.

Tai Chi's movements always incorporate Yin and Yang. When you stand on the ground it is the Yin and when your hand strikes it is the Yang. Yin and Yang keeps changing as your postures and footwork are always transforming.

People practice Tai Chi for different reasons. Some like to explore its martial arts potential and others use it to improve their health. Nonetheless, when practicing Tai Chi as a “moving” meditation you should not concentrate your mind in the same way as “calm” meditation forms.

During “calm” style meditation, you build up your Chi by focusing on Dan Tian, which is located at the acupuncture point Ren 6 (or Qi Hai), about one and a half inches below the navel. You also learn to guide your Chi to go through different acupuncture channels/meridians. In "moving" meditation (Tai Chi), you do not use your mind to guide the Chi's flow. Instead, you concentrate your focus on your movements and postures. Let the Chi reach its martial arts' function point. This is the main difference between the “calm” and “moving” meditations. If you practice Tai Chi with the same approach as calm meditation by focusing your mind on the Dan Tian area all the time, you will feel dizzy or uncomfortable and forget what you are doing. Your moving body has no relation with your inner Chi's condition.

To learn Tai Chi, you should know each posture's name. Ask your teacher to explain each posture's starting and ending position. Understand the martial art background of the posture and what it is used for. Understand the functionality of each small segment of each posture. Without this knowledge, the whole routine can not be played correctly.

As a beginner, you should copy your teacher's movements. As you start to refine your play, try to sense the relationship between the Yin (calmness) and Yang (movement). Learn to unite the outside movements with your inner mind.

Without letting your teeth touch, let the tip of your tongue touch the roof of your mouth. This is called "Building the bridge", your tongue is the bridge which connects the Ren (front side of your body) and Du (back side of your body) acupuncture channels/meridians. Stay this way until you finish your Tai Chi routine. Try to calm down.

Your body and waist should be relaxed. The shifting of your weight from one position to another should be a smooth and flowing transaction. Like a skillful violinist, you do not hear a break in a long note, even when the bow changes its direction.

Concentrate your mind within the "Target Zone," the area within the striking distance of your hand, sword or other weaponry. As your posture transforms from one to another, the "Target Zone" will change as well. Your mind should remain focused on the circular "Target Zone" area following the changes between "Yin" (calmness) and Yang (movement). Your Dan Tian is always the center. After years of training and meditation practice, you will be able to send the Chi from Dan Tian to your fists, hands, feet, and shoulders. Do not focus your eyes on a particular place. Keep your "Target Zone" and the "Outer Zone" in your sight. You see without seeing. You hear without hearing. You sense what is happening around you, but you do not register it. Do not close your eyes during your practice; you will become disoriented and may fall.

Your breathing follows the movement of your body. As in "real life," you exhale during a striking movement. If you feel your movements have a hard time synchronizing with your breathing, try adding smaller and shorter breaths or holds. Your breathing will become slower and lighter as you get into the mode, just as it does during calm style meditation. Reverse Breathing should not be used in Tai Chi practice since the approach to meditation is different. With slow and rhythmical movements and weight shifts and with correct breathing, your Chi will move to its destination and a meditative state can be achieved.

After you have learned your sword form (or other weapon form) routine, refine your play and gradually learn how to meditate with your sword. When you meditate in the sword form of Tai Chi, you are united with your sword and become the One. Your routine will flow smoothly. Your arm, wrist, and sword

connect with the Dan Tian where the origin of your movements lies. You feel your Chi being sent to the tip of the sword or to a section of the blade, depending on the posture. Then the Chi returns to the Dan Tian and continues to the next move.

In your empty-hand or Sword play, you will learn how to sense your surroundings. When you practice with other people, do not watch them directly. Use your peripheral eye sight to sense and synchronize with the group.

When you come to the ending, give yourself some time. Do not finish in a hurry. Send down the Chi to the Dan Tian then return the Chi where it belongs.

It sounds very complicated, but it is not. It is never too late to learn something. With practice and determination, you will achieve better health and better life.

Visit hsvtaichi.com for more information about the author and his Tai Chi class.