

t'ai chi and chi kung: all in the mind?

EXERCISE SYSTEMS SUCH AS YOGA, T'AI CHI, QI GONG, PILATES, RELAXATION AND MEDITATION TECHNIQUES CAN HELP TO UNITE THE MIND AND BODY BACK TOGETHER

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Throughout the world, life has changed so dramatically; values and social systems are no longer the same as they used to be in ancient times. This has brought about a dispersion of human energies on all levels and the mind of man has lost a point of balance and harmony in every sphere of existence.

Modern medical science has been trying to tackle the epidemic of stress-related disorders but is failing because the real problem does not lie in where the symptoms are manifesting (the body), but originates in our ways of thinking, feeling, values and ideals.

the battle of wits

It isn't what happens to us that makes the difference but how we respond to it. T'ai chi is not about reacting to an opponent or life situations but how to respond appropriately.

shadow boxing

Outrunning your rival doesn't necessarily mean you ran the best race, you can win over another and still not reach your highest potential – just as a

loser can be a winner if he conquered himself in the process. This is why t'ai chi is often referred to as "shadow boxing" – boxing with our own darker/hidden side, which can be the doubts, fears, anxieties, illusions or negative thoughts and emotions that continually challenge us.

a little of the background

The origins of chi kung (qi gong) are rooted in ancient China – one of its best kept secrets – and is said to date back over 5,000 years, mostly handed down through oral transmission to selected disciples who their masters felt had the moral qualities to pass it on correctly and use it with integrity. T'ai chi (taiji) then developed out of this study.

Adepts included warriors, princes, poets, monks, wise men and martial artists; all were dedicated to cultivation of the Tao (Way) of life in order to reach their highest potential, and to working with the universal energy (Chi) which included maintaining the quality, strength and flow of this life force within themselves.

the metaphor of yin and yang

The above may have caused some of you – those with more scientific backgrounds – to become slightly sceptical, whereas you others who gather information more intuitively from the relationship between ideas that are less tangible will find these concepts easier to accept.

Here we can already clearly see an example of the metaphor of Yin and Yang, described as two magnetic poles, derived from or contained in a single force field which represents opposing yet complementary forces, constantly interacting like the left and right brain, revealing the meaning of life on every level. Nothing in the natural world exists in isolation and in order to appreciate and experience something fully there must be the notion of its opposite.

flexibility and strength

The aim of t'ai chi is to remove all unnecessary tension that impedes the flow of chi (energy) and to remain flexible and attentive to your situation on a mental, emotional and physical level. Tension in your muscles can make you perform the movements in a mechanical way, whereas – when performed slowly, softly and flowing continuously – it allows the body to generate energy rather than expend it and enables your mind to locate and adjust areas of stiffness and tension within the body, giving you a workout for the brain as well. Doing the movements too fast means not only will you miss the vital signs of blockage but sacrifice the posture, which reduces your power and prevents you progressing to a higher level.

The internal art of t'ai chi differs from the external martial arts in that instead of directing your chi/force at an opponent you are using the same force to strengthen yourself. It is often referred to as a dynamic form of meditation that requires you to coordinate and focus the mind, body and breath into every action you make so your external movements are linked with the concentration of the mind – which can be very exacting for the beginner.

the five transformations

Energy is continually moving and transforming. By observing these changes in nature, the Chinese gave rise not only to the concept of Yin and Yang but also a cyclic pattern of change known as the Five Transformations, which explain the connection between cause and effect and can be applied to our state of mind, emotional tendencies, physical movements and all energetic and material phenomena.

the five states of mind

1. The rising energy allows us to grow, create and move forward, think ahead, challenge, plan, organise, visualise and decide.
2. The outward energy allows us to communicate, become inspired, be inspirational and react appropriately to situations, and to take pleasure in learning and developing our intellect.
3. The ability of energy to slow down and return to a centre creates a stable foundation and balance for the mind, enabling us to have sound opinions, creative ideas and nourishing thoughts that support us.
4. The energy that consolidates helps us let go of clutter which leads to clarity of thought, sharpness and sound judgments.
5. The energy that sinks and withdraws allows time for looking into the deeper recesses of our minds to discover hidden powers, to reflect and develop memory, imagination and willpower.

An excess or deficiency in any of these qualities will affect not just our peace of mind but our energy levels and well-being.

The intention of the mind is also a fundamental principle of t'ai chi training "where the mind goes the energy follows".

Breath is a reflection of human energy in the system, so practising breathing exercises balances the entire system, establishes emotional equilibrium, harmonises the organs and stimulates the energy in the Meridians (pathways of chi).

The breath and the mind can be used to conduct visual images, such as breathing in light to cleanse or breathing out smoky impurities, by directing inhaled light to an affected, weak or injured part of the body or by releasing pain or tension on the exhalation.

martial arts

T'ai chi chuan is often referred to as the supreme ultimate fighting system. Ch'uan can be interpreted as control that implies both self-control and control over a given situation. In the symbolic bow, the right fist (the Yang of the mind) is placed in the open palm of the left hand (the Yin of wisdom which preceded the mind) indicating that the power of intellect must always be used with wisdom. Rather than meeting force with a counterforce like the harder styles, t'ai chi employs sensitivity and timing to adhere to the force and redirect it. When one sees these forms being practised, it looks like a slow-motion dance with no apparent strength, yet in fact a great force is being generated within in order to perfect technique, coordination, timing, balance and centring, which, when speeded up, can be used for both fighting and self-defence.

Regardless of whether you come to t'ai chi and qi gong through the gate of medicine and health practices, meditation or martial arts, the common denominator that links them all is chi, the universal free energy of life that heals the body, enlightens the mind and empowers the practitioner physically as well as spiritually. Also a continual awareness of the intent of the mind is not only a fundamental principle of t'ai chi but for the enjoyment and fulfilment of life itself. **fp**



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