

Questions & Answers

A selection of questions and answers over the years from John's classes, workshops, and e-mails. These may be informative regardless of training with John or his Teachers. Please see available books and other web sites for greater depth and more information. Views expressed below are John's and may not accurately express his Teachers methods or explanations.

Tai Chi Chuan

1. Do you have to be physically fit to learn Tai Chi?

No, certainly for the majority its not necessary. 'Physical fitness' as understood from a western perspective is not a necessity in Tai Chi, unless the martial or competition side enters the equation, and even then it may not always be necessary. The average partitioner will never train for these aspects of Tai Chi anyway.

Its quite feasible to learn Tai Chi even if you are very unfit, in recovery from illness, or presently ill. It can also be adapted for those restricted to bed, or unable to stand or walk. Many including myself have successfully taught the physically fit {including professional athletes and martial artists} those considered 'unfit', and also the healthy, the unwell, and the chronically, and terminally ill. For me that aspect was a sad but a truly humbling and rewarding experience.

For those who are 'physically fit' {from a western definition} and enjoying a general fitness program and/or a particular sport, it can be hugely rewarding and very sensible in many ways to learn Tai Chi. Particularly of interest to sports people should be Tai Chi's ability to improve recovery from exercise and/or injury in a shorter time, and also improve energy levels, co-ordination, and concentration skills. Many Chinese sports people train in Tai Chi just for these factors. Though it has to be said Tai Chi will improve your chosen fitness programs results, but your fitness program wont necessarily improve your Tai Chi.

As for Martial Artists, many Kung Fu and Karate schools are well known to teach it for similar reasons, as improved relaxation, concentration under pressure, co-ordination, and gaining "flow" can improve skill levels. This is especially important for martial artists over 30. Tai Chi can keep your favoured practice alive when others may be giving theirs up due to the ageing process and

other factors. Tai Chi is a life long pursuit that adapts to the changes of life, many sports and martial arts frankly do not.

2. Im not very co-ordinated - it looks like a lot of complicated movements i might not be able to do, or remember?! Can i still learn to do tai chi?

Yes of course you can, please don't be put off ;-}. Many learn successfully without any previous ability to co-ordinate movement, or sport ability. Two of my female students were both told they'd never excel at any sport or fitness regime. One because of joint problems, the other because of being over weight. Both now jump around with great gusto and big grins, with swords, sabre and sticks. In fact they are more talented than I was at their age or after their period of learning. The only limit is really yourself. Don't believe everything you're told, especially by people who have no experince of training.

Of course effort will be required though, with regular practice. This is usually the only stumbling block, as a lot of us are put off easily if we don't get instant or quick results. This seems to be increasing problem with all ages, not just the young, with the pace of the modern world and the ease and availability of various forms of highly stimulatory, captivating and distracting entertainment. Many teenagers interested in martial arts who would gain so much, learn only to 'play' them as computer games. Its a great shame. I have to say I consider myself and my peers lucky we didn't have this distraction when we were young. I doubt i would have left my bedroom goggling at a screen either, and gone out to train at classes. I had an experince of getting addicted to 'pac man' briefly on my dads computer in the 80's, but that didn't last long. I played on a play station when they first came out, but still found real life, although often rough, tough and not always fun, at least very 'real'. Classes, training, jobs, pubs, relationships, music, dinner parties, clubs, parties etc were far more interesting. Seems reality is too boring or too awful for many now and computer games are a way out, a distraction, or safe predictable haven. Its very sad. I find it an increasingly depressing the more realistic they have become. The used to be a avid discussion in the 90's about the connection between military investment and games development, conspiracies galore, but that's so obvious now no one seems to care.

They are really bad for your health, as is any screen watching for huge periods of time so just for that reason I stay well away from them. So 'real life' and/or Tai Chi is certainly harder, will push your buttons {rather than the easier you pushing your remote controllers} is going to take some work and commitment, but boy is it more rewarding in the long run.

Personally I wasn't very co-ordinated either when i started Tai Chi at 19. I was fairly useless at sport, but I could however dance, which came as a complete surprise to me. I had a lot of stamina too {in a teenage Hormone fuelled excess fashion}. Previous to that though when I was 7 or 8 my right ear drum burst from an infection. Balance was a real prob for many years, literally I couldn't walk straight. Navigating through store aisles with breakables on store shelves was particularly traumatic for me, if not

comic watch. This greatly effected my confidence and co-ordination which was already poor at all school sports because of poor eyesight, asthma, allergies, nervousness, dyslexia, and basic left right hand co-ordination. Its become a bit of a phrase i dish out a lot but i do believe if i can do it any one can whatever their personal situation. My crowning athletic achievement t school was winning a gold medal in, wait for it, in the egg and spoon race when I was about 10. Impressive huh. Still have the medal somewhere.

A lot of successful teachers and students have similar stories and similar feelings about gaining ability. Persistence is the key and if you really want it, you'll get it. Those though without those kind of limitations can really become quite amazing. Many of my students learn far more easily than I did and in a shorter time because they come without so much historic and physical baggage.

3. To be honest im quite lazy, how much do I have to do a week to get the benefits? When the best time to train?

That's very honest of you, at least you've recognised the problem. Most of us have some of that, we all go through less than perfect times in our training.

An apt cliché-'How longs a piece of string'- Obviously it's a personal thing but the basic requirement agreed by many including myself {and its the traditional view} is everyday, and first thing in the morning to start. Three times a day if possible. Work upwards form say ten mins a day to a hour, splitting that in two or three sessions. Most intermediates upwards do a minimum of two hours a day split into mornings and evenings. At various stages this may be more but rarely less. Some can get away with it, most cant. For the un or low motivated, or tired {laziness is can be caused by many factors} its best to have small easy to achieve goals in the beginning. That can really have great ramifications. However one might have to start with a minute or two and build from there. Guilt trips from ourselves or others don't work for most people, nor comparisons with others motivations or abilities. Shameing oneself into practice maybe part of some cultures, as with the chinese, but for most westerners it seems to be unsuccessful if not completely counter productive. Some teachers bully and coerce students, as that's probably how they learnt, or they enjoy the power trip. I've had both kinds and I've pushed myself personally both kindly and harshly. I do neither now 'just' train. Forget all the mind games of ourselves and others. and as the old advertising logo went-'just do it'. It was very successful campaign, in more ways than one.

4. I didn't know Tai Chi was a Martial Art. That side doesn't interest me. Im not into fighting or hitting anyone. Will I have to learn that stuff?

Yes that's correct- it was pretty good too, according to history and the stories that abound. Nowadays a lot of that ability is lost, and even so would be quite redundant, apart from in peoples vivid fantasies. Leave that for kung fu flicks.

Its still easier too to learn other martial arts quicker for the purpose of that kind of thing. No one trains like the old tai chi guys pre 1930's any more, some come close but they are the exception. The hand gun famously ended a lot of that need in China the early 1900's, and then later many other factors.

Most do not teach this side anyway,so don't fret, you only do what you want to do in classes usually. Personally I do, but its not my emphasis in most classes, health and personal development is as that's what most people need, and want. However learning some of the martial side can really clear up some issues people have including confidence, assertion, fear, cowardice, dealing with others {including unwarranted personal contact}, and feelings of powerlessness. Many women, and even men, live in fear of personal assault even without having experienced it. For those who have they can become emotionally scarred for life. Having 'been there done that' as a physically and psychologically bullied kid, I personally wanted to remedy it as quickly as possible. I left it too late in some ways starting martial arts at 19 when I was 'getting out of hand' as a cliché rebellious teenager. I don't know how I would be if I hadn't attempted to remedy it though. Im no saint, but without these decades of training and transformation, it doesn't bear worth thinking about what Id be or where Id be without it.

The Martial side can be more athletic too so its suits that kind of player. That's why I got into the weapons forms, which in some way if we in the martial arts are honest, are nothing but fancy and fun theatrical props really. Mind you a stick is pretty good if it comes to hand, let alone dustbin lids and other street furniture. The health effects are very good reasons for doing them beyond that, as they are the 'resistance' training of tai chi. It takes a lot to wield a heavy object in your hands dextrously whether slowly or at speed.

All of us need courage to develop beyond normal day to day mind sets and stress, our histories and conditioning, all our limitations. Many lack this quality of courage or tenacity, and I've seen people move ahead quickly into modes of accelerated self development by learning to understand elements of the practical side of martial tai chi. As long as its done playfully even the most timid of individuals can gain from it. I've been lucky enough to witness this in various students. That's a good point for seniors and teachers to remember when dealing with such individuals if they really want to help. This unfortunately is not always the case, the stereotypical bullying Martial Art teacher or senior student is fortunately not as prevalent as it used to be, but it still exists. They have achieved ultimately nothing in their years of practice, which is unfortunate. We all have to watch for that.

5. Is Tai Chi always slow? Sure it all looks graceful and flowing, relaxing etc, but I think id get bored moving like that all the

time. Im more interested in learning the fighting/self defence side. Also I cant see how it would work in a real fight.

I can understand that. My original motivation to learn was self defence, though I was attracted to Tai Chi and its movement expression. I probably saw it on telly at some point, I can't identify when, some point in the 70's around the time of the 'Kung Fu' series, which I loved. This was before I found out the star Caradine wasn't a martial artist, had replaced Bruce Lee in the role, and was stoned out of his goud on set, hence the dreamy floaty air he had. He died recently in a ward robe in a bizarre masturbatory sex act. Its very sad and sordid, but it make s you wonder that he really didn't learn much while he was here.

When I started to learn Tai Chi it all made absolutely no sense martially. Even with the impressive skills of my first teacher Chu KIng Hung {circa 1984}, and explanations, I really couldn't do it myself for ages {if not years} which made me feel more than completely useless, so I went off after a while to study Wing Chun Kung Fu. {Please see John's article 'Why Learn Tai Chi?' and the 'Wing Chun Questions'}. This made more sense, but something for me was missing. That's why for various reasons why I went back to Tai Chi and it became my focus, right or wrong.

Its interesting to note that some of Tai Chi's names before it got 'marketed' with that 'illustrious' title {'Grand Ultimate Boxing' doesn't leave a lot of room for humble origins } were 'Soft', 'Transforming', or 'Cotton Boxing'. The pliability and feel of dealing with a Tai Chi expert confused the hell out of people in the 1800 and 1900's used to the hard bore Shaolin types. Some were pretty good at it too, the founder of Yang Style was nicknamed 'Yang the Invincible',as he travelled China took on all challenges and was never beaten. Thus with this rep he became the instructor to the Imperial Emperors Guard {the Emperors body guards basically, the guys who would 'take the bullet' so to speak} Unfortunately his skills didn't pass it seems completely down the generations, whatever his relatives have said.

Dependant on the teacher and style, Tai Chi is not always done slowly. We all learn it in the beginning slowly, as it is easier to learn components that way, but traditionally there were and are fast or more correctly 'explosive' sets/ techniques. Personally I spent the first ten years moving only slowly in Tai Chi as that's what was on offer to me. However I was doing Wing Chun Kung Fu at the same time in the beginning, which is practiced mostly fast and explosively. For a time I was doing Aikido quite well too, which has varying speed aspects, and fluidity with relaxation, structural alignments over muscular power etc, but that's another story.

For most good tai chi classes the first one to three years is just slow work apart from any Martial Apps that are taught where you learn slowly, but move on to 'as fast as necessary and possible' with competence. Tai Chi is not about being 'faster', the typical saying is 'the opponent starts{initiates the attack/movement} you move last but arrive first{defeat them}'".

Its individual the progression when you start to learn the other aspects and methods, depending on ability and need. I teach the parts I know as soon as someone wants it. I think it can do more good than harm.

The beauty of Tai Chi is its deceptive to the eye. Kung Fu, Karate, Boxing, cage fighting, MAA etc, whatever your preference and orientation, often just train develop, and show obvious raw power. With obvious results. Hence they make great spectator sports and cinematic inclusions. The great exponents of great Karate and Kung Fu often look less obvious, are not particularly flashy or photogenic, and are highly deceptive too. Tai Chi is a lot of work, more than others to get the martial side really working. The older you get the subtler it becomes. Obviously this doesn't suit everyone's need for instant results, nor exhibitionism, or quick to learn systems. Even if you don't get the 'whole' Tai Chi gig { few do whatever anyone is professing to have I certainly haven't}, you get great runners up prizes- possibly including great health, and peace of mind.

6. Why move slowly at all, doesn't health and fitness, and especially martial arts need strength, speed and stamina?

Great question. The three big S's that some get obsessed with. Two parts to that. The first would take a book and i've yet to do that, if ever. I've tried many times but it takes too much time, and there are far more qualified practitioners out there to do that and who have. Please see Bruce Frantzis's book the 'Power of Internal Martial Arts' for an overview on speed in the martial arts, and more highly useful info. Dan Docherty's, Erle Montaigne's, and Yang Jwing Ming's books are good too. Non perfect but good and occasionally great. Cross referencing is often necessary, and training if possible with the author. I've done that with both with Mr Frantzis, Erle, and Dan Docherty's Practical Tai Chi Student Teachers. On the down side books can be a little self serving though, so beware of agendas overt or covert. They are often the more 'palatable side' of authors ways too. 'Words are cheap' and 'don't judge a book by its cover' are not clichés for their lack of truth.

Briefly, moving slowly, as any one can discover even in one lesson i've seen, causes a relaxation response. This may seem obvious, but most find its not easy moving slowly with co-ordination without tension. Tension is not relaxing, but can give a sense of power which is why many like it. Who right now doesn't need relaxation, but wants 'power' in their life. The majority im sure, but we don't see the connection until we learn the correlation between the two. Relaxation doesn't mean collapse, lassitude, powerlessness, energetic or physical exhaustion. But it can when needed mean a gentle passiveness which is very Yin and is very healing to damaged bodies and minds. Holy men/women can exhibit this overt Yin, and ill tell you they are by no means weak or without power! Some call this one of the big secrets of Tai Chi-where you train purposefully in a very 'Yin' fashion until the Yin naturally creates Yang type power. Trouble is easy to just go into a 'dead end' Yin state, where any Yang qualities are just suppressed. This is seen in many religions, in Zen its called 'dead sitting', or 'dead Zen'.{Please see the

question on Yin and Yang}

Most working adults only experience 'exhaustion' {extreme Yin from exhausted Yang} but not 'relaxation' { Yin relaxing Yang, Yang storing and building}, and hence confuse the two. Powerlessness also can make people feel very tense and 'wound up' even angry {false Yang}, reducing the ability to relax ten fold {exhausted Yang consuming Yin to try and replenish itself}. Its actually endemic in the modern work place particularly offices. The simple remedy is more Yin to repair the depleted Yang- we call this rest, but few get enough sleep, Tai Chi as with Chi Kung or Yoga can supply this rest outside of sleeping. I can personally attest to this/

'Relax' is a constant training procedure and a constant through a tai chi practitioners life. Moving slowly enables sensitivity to ones chi flows and initially for the beginner to gain control of the muscle groups involved in each movement. Some never feel Chi but that doesn't mean their Tai Chi cant be brilliant. Some discount Chi entirely. That's a shame.

It actual takes stamina to move slowly, especially the kicks and large steps. Forms that take twenty minutes can be slowed even more to take over an hour. You sweat more than you would on a uphill bike ride !

So Tai Chi uses slowness as a primary but not exclusive method, but 'speed' does exist in the Tai Chi repertoire, although some restrict their training to the slow methods through choice or just what they know. They do a very good job though with helping people to relax and heal with this methodology.

7. What's the Five Element System in relation to Tai Chi? I've read lots about it, its seems to be everywhere in Chinese Medicine and philosophy. I practice Shiatsu Massage {Japanese Massage Technique similar to Chinese Tui Na} which contains a lot of Five Element approaches.

That's correct. In Tai Chi a few schools, styles, or teachers, use the Five Element system to describe processes of gaining ability in Tai Chi, but also Hsing I, and Ba Gua, and other styles too. That's in relation to understanding training methodology, or gauging the changes in the practitioners own body and experince. As with all Chinese Arts there are various methods and approaches. Some are similar, some seem counter intuitive or without practical application. That's the case with a lot of theories.

This is my method and present approach, but that's not to say its the best or the most efficient,{or correct} and Im always refining my personal approach and understanding. Im not going to profess its the 'traditional method' either. I don't play that game of

mine is the best, the original, the only authentic, everyone else is inferior, or I have exclusive knowledge that no other has-careful of those schools/teachers who do. Everything in Tai Chi or Chinese Philosophy etc is pretty easy to talk about- not so easy to understand or let alone do. We all have to take up the challenge of what we know and make it 'real' and practical. Also the oriental mind and language is very much different. I had to immerse myself in this for decades and im still learning. My teacher Bruce Frantzis has a very great grasp of it. Im sure he'd find fault after fault here with my interpretation!

So briefly in terms of Five Element theory in Tai Chi the first objective, as agreed by most in Tai Chi, is to move slowly and relax, lowering, deepening sensation {call it 'chi' if you wish} deep into the body {both the physical and esoteric anatomy model}. That's basically away from the emphasis on muscles and into the ligaments, spine, bones, and organs. Simultaneously dropping energetically with sensation beyond the physical body into the ground. This is obviously tied to the 'Earth' element. We have the sayings 'being grounded', 'down to earth', 'solid individual', 'holding it together', 'rooted' and others in English which describes this attribute and similar energetic expressions quite well. At this point large or medium, expanded and stable postures are practiced, often held, not moving, and without sequence. Holding postures is not easy. Its the back bone of all the internal arts as with external arts, regardless of wishes for health or martial ability. Its done without excessive force or tension, taking the a Taoist maxim of 'relax and be still' as its training approach. Shaolin does it sometimes like this but mostly 'muscling it' out with determination and bravado. Im not saying that doesn't get results and I've trained that way, and I still do Shaolin practices, but its only suitable for the strong. Not to say that that 'attitude' doesn't exist in tai chi, not all exponents' are chilled out relaxed and mellow fellows! In Tai Chi it can be the postures from the forms or others individual to a style. All this is pretty boring, and very uncomfortable for most, so many schools dispense with that because no one would come back! I hated it as a teenager, as most do. I still practice this method, its very good after spending too much time working on a computer. I teach it too in class.

Second objective move 'following'/'watching'/'listening' the sensation of chi flow through the body accompanied by the breath {Metal}. Link the large or medium postures into a sequence or remain with individual held postures{easier}. Build the up bodily reserves and general health {'developing armour' I was told obviously an attribute of 'metal'}. A feeling of improved stamina, fortitude, relaxed strength, and well being should occur. Occasionally though its gets too much and an individual becomes a real bull in a china shop, throwing their weight and power around {excessive yang}. This level of power is intoxicating and obviously was useful if you were regularly fighting. It doesn't work very well though in the modern work place.

In the Yang family it was forbidden to do anything 'external' at this point {using weights as in Shaolin methods was always forbidden} including push hands, fighting, weapons {tai chi's 'weight training' } etc. Anything that 'used 'the energy being built up {for instance to build muscle} was deemed a no no and entirely counter productive. Few can train like this, or teach like this. You

would have no students. As I understand it the time spent at this level could be very long. Stories of practicing only one posture over a year are common. Most of us have to back track in our training because we learn or are taught a lot, but without content.

Work of the physical kind in general was possibly off limits at this stage, but that's my conjecture. Fees from students for the famous families paid the bills, and the Wife's and or servants would have done all house work and menial tasks for husbands and sons anyway. Not that I agree with that delegation of daily fare, it was just the way things were culturally. Few of us have the luxury of that, but it's worth looking at how we use the energy we can accumulate. Few accumulate though, or even know they can or should, and that's a problem with many people's health. We live in a culture of spend spend spend, energetically, ecologically, and financially. It's why we are all in such a mess. It's sensible for those serious about Tai Chi to moderate their habits for this reason.

in Ba Gua some of the well known masters had businesses including coal and lumber, but it could be pharmacies, protection services {body guards} import export etc. I'm sure they didn't have to cook the dinner though, walk the dog, or deal with the kids! Often though the students would run the family businesses so the master could concentrate on his own training, and thus be a good teacher. They weren't stupid. What's the point of having a teacher whose too worn out to train let alone teach you the good stuff!

Third part. Sustain the amount that can flow {increasing sensitivity to the flow too} with 'storage' and 'transformation' 'nourishing', altering the style of movements as multidimensional circles {Water} Large, Medium or Small postures-'the ripples on the pond of chi'. The 'external' breath {that of the lungs inhalation and exhalation} is no longer focused on, but the 'internal' {the movement of vital energy and where its flows are weak or too strong}. Feeling the currents and 'shape' of Chi in the body is difficult and many don't even feel Chi so this aspect is very much dependant on the individual. I'm not going to ostracise those who don't, there Tai Chi could be better than mine. Stationary postures with even more subtlety are used to observe sensations deeply. Meditation is often but not always included at this point as it becomes a natural development and is likely to be a purely mental construct.

Fourth 'build', or establish this flow {it depends on your view some say the meridians or channels only exist when we bring them into play, others that they are there and latent} into distinct pathways, direct and circulate the flow smoothly in spirals/loops {Wood} in and around the body. Some call these the 'belt channels'. Movements of spiralling motions both visible and hidden {depending on your tai chi style}

Fifth- 'let it all be'- the waiting game- till 'it' your surplus, wants to express explosively {Fire}. The 'waiting game' for most before

this is achieved in Tai Chi is about 3-10 years. Mine was as long because I wasn't properly taught in my early years nor knew of the process. In fact mine was virtually accidental. It happened one day while I was waiting, practicing standing, for my students to arrive at a class. My body wanted to move so it did, explosively. I didn't even know about Fa Jing. Some though never get it all after 30 years or more with training. They seem to get very solid or relaxed, but have no power. They might not want to either. Then again some gifted practitioners get it sooner. Mine was very Yang, quite low grade, the best is like a burst of air and more Yin without any obvious physical build/wind up. I don't think anyone has this at its highest level anymore. I may be very wrong

Once achieved a practice session the 'waiting' {generation of } can be a few seconds or less to manifest. This particular part was my late teacher Earl Montague's method or his 'brand' of Fa Jing. It can however be over done. In the Yang Family its said it sent Yang Shou Hou mad which led to his suicide {'excess fire'}, So even the famous and qualified can go wrong and destroy themselves. Pay heed to that 'fire' can 'burn' or 'cook', it all depends how it is used. You really don't want to cook your brain. Many do. Depletion and destruction of the body just to exhibit and feel power is what the ancient Taoists noticed and warned against. Its one of the common problems with Shaolin type arts if done incorrectly too.

Finally so, most importantly, in the process one returns to to 'Earth' {in more ways than one} to balance and 'ground'. Then Metal can contain and nurture the Jing/Chi/vitality, Water can smooth, nourish, and increase the flow and transformation, Wood make it and everything from it grow {e.g. Jing- Chi -Shen cycles} and allow us to be truly in harmony according to the seasons of life as well as the year, storing the life force manifesting it when appropriate as degrees of Fire {'bud to flower to fruit'}. The Fire unexpressed is the vitality in the eyes of the practitioner. Even when old. Earl seemed to 'shine' in general, but I didn't see him at the end. To me he exuded light. 'The candle that burns twice as bright burns half as long' I think is apt but only respectfully pointed to here. It will take me along time to get over his death this year {2011}.

All the times seek to relax fully into the process. The cycle can be endless. Across a life, or life times. Im sure it can be described and practiced better than me, and there's subtleties to it beyond my present comprehension. Its a vast field Five Element theory. I try to live and learn an art and not theorise too much.

As this is a cycle of creation and of return Practitioners can spend years on one element, some teachers keep a students focus on one, for good and not so good reasons. Like most things, excellence isn't easy and so its easy to confuse quality and the real deal, with a lot of marketing that may or may not lead to the right door. And again in Tai Chi this goes a long way. Personally I'd admit im not great at marketing {had to do a lot of it as a jewellery designer}. I realise one needs it but I don't like it in Tai Chi and the esoteric arts in general, and in that sense I'm not a great Tai Chi business man. Trouble is even saying that seems like a piece of self marketing spiel.

To note most modern Tai Chi tries and starts with 'Water'- the obvious flowing movements Tai Chi is famous for- and usually gets stuck there {bogged down even}. Im not saying this is bad, but its limited. With my teacher Master R Shonaike I had start from the very beginning after ten years of previous training. I'd become quite Yin too. I was stuck in an overt Water flowing mode. Stuck water is 'stagnant' and doesn't have life. Now you see my 'Water' is in excess, excuse the surplus of this long rambling river of a reply.

8. Does Tai Chi really keep you young? Some of the Tai Chi masters I've seen on you tube look terrible, even the not too old ones? Lumbering, jerky and fat even some of them. I thought it tuned you into an immortal or something?

Don't be too concerned with how some of them look, or with the weight thing. 'You tube' is both a blessing and a curse to the tai chi world, as with most subjects on it. Andy Warhol got it right saying we'd all be famous for 15 mins!

Tai Chi wont give you a six pack, its quite usual for the body of a tai chi exponent to be either dumpy, weak looking, heavy set, or even very skinny. They can also though look very heavy set and powerful. In the Yang Family the males were both big and thin, and their styles were extensions and expressions of this. Tai Chi and its various styles, suits and creates many different kinds of body types. Some come to it without any former training that has created a particular body type, for instance if they did shaolin arts. Others do.

Muscles are secondary factors if at all, not primary in Tai Chi. I cant comment on the jerky lumbering one as I don't know who you mean, but it could be because of a number of factors. The history of an individual has many elements we are not privy to. For some Tai Chi is something that works for them, others not. They might even be respected teachers. Also the old people still alive in china doing tai chi would have lived through dome truely terrible times during the Cultural Revolution {brutality, famine, all kinds of stress few of us here would cope with even for a day. I really hope we never have to}, so its amazing they are simply alive! Don't judge a book by its cover- we need to extend compassion to them. Many stories abound of tai chi keeping people alive and sane while imprisoned and worse, and just under years of house arrest.

The oldest Chinese guy I've talked to recently was in San Francisco in 2007. Every morning Chinese Martial artists etc train in the Golden Gate park in a treed area near the zen garden there. Been there twice now and made some nice friends. In his 90's this guys Wu Style Tai Chi ws great, very small frame. He proves youthfulness in old age is possible, he was eloquent in English and passionate about his Tai Chi. He also taught Kung Fu.

Many middle age women start tai chi in China because its known to make your skin look softer. Personally i didn't originally start for that or any other cosmetic or health reasons. Only later on did I get interested in that. I was a teenager, and even though I abused my body in typical teenage fashion, I was pretty fit and well. I personally wanted to learn self defence so I didn't get beat up by skinheads and other assorted nutters who resented my appearance. I was a punk with the whole pale, skinny in black, mohican rebel without a clue look -quite a sight. Oh and yes like a friend of mine at the time commented-I prob couldn't fight my way out of a paper bag. Nowadays I reckon the bag would be pretty worried! So watch out all you dangerous deviant lurking in the shadows paper bullies!

So health in any guise wasn't my concern until in my early twenties after my mother was again diagnosed with cancer. I decided to clean up my act and stop causing so much family concern, I went to the other extreme and got in to martial arts, health food, no drink, no drugs, going to gym etc. My mates wondered what the hell happened, because it was virtually overnight, but I was already a known 'chameleon' so it wasn't a huge unknown. I didn't know quite why I was doing it it just seemed like the right thing to do. Not that I was any kind of saint mind you, still not, I had my own selfish motivations too- I was fed up with looking like death warmed up. Yellow skin, 6 ft 2 and a size 0 as a bloke is not a good look, frankly I'd begun to look ill, my life style was taking its toll. So Tai chi began a process of wising up, and changed my personal point of view on many things quite early on.

Im now closer to 50 than 40, and I can see the long health benefits are real, and also sadly why many people get so ill from life style choices, unavoidable stress, and other factors. I d say pre 30 if you're healthy Tai Chi is a 'positive life style choice', post 30 'a life style necessity'. If you are un well etc start now, regardless of age. A harsh zen no nonsense side would say compassionately but more bluntly- your a fool if you don't learn Tai Chi over 30! But no one likes been assaulted with words, so take that politely and its intended effect. Tai Chi is not everyone's cup of tea though.

So remember though the majority of tai chi practitioners practice for health reasons only, and many only start in their 50's or later once they've started to have problems. Prevention is always better than cure though. I like to see that change and it is slowly but still not to the degree would be wise. Yoga has been more widely adopted as a healthy life option but many aren't drawn to that either.

As for Immortals, well there's a lot of marketing out there, some that started 100's of years ago about the benefits of all things esoteric, anti ageing, eternal youth etc . The chinese historically went out of their way {and occasionally out of their minds too} and often at great expense to find the 'fountain of youth' via herbs, exercise, sexual practices etc. They were not always very successful and those who were are the stuff of Chinese legend- real or fabricated. A lot of misconception are out there now also, fuelled by the film industry, gameing, and popular culture both in China and the west.

Youthfulness is possible, I doubt 'physical' Immortality as proffered by some is possible, frankly I cant think of anything more tedious than living as a human for ever. That's not to say I don't believe in it from a 'Spiritual Immortality' perspective, and parts of my training in yoga and chi kung have both been to this end. No one can prove though, in fact anything about what happens after death, so its all open to question. Prob best we should keep our focus and attention on what's worth doing for us, and others. The after life is used by many misguided souls as some form of bribery to justify some outrageous, heinous and immoral acts, both to one self, others, animals and the environment.

As we all know now living well requires a lot of stress reduction, so maybe it was possible to grow very old living in monasteries, the mountains etc with a practice designed to aid that. As for reversing large aspects of physical ageing with Tai Chi I doubt it, unless you really 'leave the world' and find an idyllic location and remove absolutely all stress. This is what the ancient Taoists sought living in the mountains. This may have once been possible before, I doubt it is now in China, and the genuine training as I understand it, is mostly lost. There are still hermits living in the Himalayas practicing Yoga's of various kinds but I doubt they are looking for physical immortality, as sought by the ancient Taoists. There emphasis has always to leave the body as soon as possible.

In China there's a resurgence of Taoism, and associated schools and temples. The quality of all this I've no personal idea, but I've heard not so great. All very commercially driven apparently. I've met one modern young Taoist priest, Master Li from Chengdu, when I was in Thailand, who seems a nice guy. I couldn't comment on his depth of knowledge or skill. Hopefully there will be a growth in China in real rather than 'tourist taoism'. Maybe down the line it will reach its previous lofty heights again, but that may take many generations again.

So I haven met any living immortals, though some profess to be on that path. There are the stories of the very long lived {the most famous in the scrupulous imperial archives of a guy called Peng I believe, living to over 800. Records list his wife's and children. These records were known for facts rather embellishment. He was listed because he worked for the Imperial services.} Remember Immortal worship is part of trad chinese culture, for some though its nothing more than folk stories like ours of various elf's, fairies, etc. or father christmas.

I've met and trained with people who look both great and terrible on Tai Chi. Some don't care how they look anyway, which is prob a very healthy approach in our image fixated world, they just train for the abilities.

Many judge by appearance only, I have to deal with that as a teacher, and as an artist I create images so I know the power this

form of expression has over our minds. Look for the content, the life under the surface, the vitality, not the flesh, were all be better off and healthier for that approach.

9. I often feel tired after Tai Chi practice, when before i felt fine. I've no particular health issues as far as i know. What should I do, and is this normal?

Without really knowing you its hard to say so I may generalise here.

I can say 99% of the time this is a good sign, especially for the ageing, over worked and stressed. Please consult a health professional if it continues though-chronic tiredness should always be investigated.

Sit down after practice even during a class, rest, meditate, or even have a sleep at home if needed and possible. The body is getting a chance to recognise, reorganise, heal and repair aspects that you or it weren't even aware of. This could include basic stress in the nervous system, excess and/or deficiency states in the organs and meridians, or just the everyday wear and tear that's built up. Poor digestion can make people tired the same as stress can. Tai Chi is recommended to those with all such issues.

Just go with the bodies signals and indications. Don't as most do through no real fault of there own, and go and block it out, soldier on, or take stimulants to just keep going. Work and the work place doesn't always allow for health or rest, but try not to make things worse. Bravado and ignorance like this is making many people ill everyday. This is not the way of Tai Chi.

Stimulants are a real drain on the body and real 'no no' if you're serious about gaining superior health. I did them as class A's as a kid so speak form some experince. I rarely have caffeine, even a cola. Even chocolate is a problem for me. In fact I was known for clubbing late into the night, post my dark drug days, on a can of coke. It was my little joke when asked 'What keeps you going mate?' as I danced through the night 'Coke' Id say. 'Yeah great man right on geezer' etc they'd go- 'no' I say lifting up the can if i still had it. 'C-o-k-e a C-o-l-a'. They were often gob smacked. It was the chi of Tai Chi and Kung Fu, and sensible living that made me want to and able to party in my twenties. I even had a second burst in my thirties.

10. I read Tai Chi can help with depression. I often have it and wondered if it would be good to learn? I don't do any other exercise as I don't like the whole gym thing.

Simply put-yes it does. If you don't even normal exercise can help so please at least give that ago. Swimming and running can

easily and cheaply done, I understand the gym atmosphere is very off putting to many. Its a strange often narcissic world. Can cause its own neuroses and depression.

My family has a history of inherited depression. My younger sister has never had it, my older late sister had it for most of her life and suffered terribly. I've successfully managed my whole life without any prescribed medication during depressive and dark times, and since my twenties using tai chi, kung fu, chi kung, yoga and meditation. Not perfectly mind you, and certainly it took a lot back then to get out of a rut. Nowadays I'm pretty good at shifting my internal rhythms and biochemistry, so I can surf my emotions pretty well, rather than drowning in them. Doesn't mean I always feel great, its just I take it as the way things are more easily.

Tai Chi is the simpler less aggressive method for most, its only problem is many find it hard to learn. Regardless of that and from my and others experience Tai Chi can shift someone into a better state of mind very quickly even as a novice. For an expert It can literally take a pessimistic mood and shift it to optimistic within a single session or few moves.

We are just literally animated physical chemistry at the end of the day, hormones, glands and synapsal exchanges. I've no doubt about TC's powers alter all this positively and it really proves that our minds create our reality or perception of it. There was recent research on how optimistic people have a different brain function and chemistry to ones classified as pessimistic. The premise of eastern philosophy that the origin of all maladies is the mind is not far wrong then, if not spot on. There's no doubt that brain chemistry is influenced by moving Chi through the body and brain smoothly and evenly, a factor Tai Chi practice stipulates. Unfortunately very rarely done wrong in Tai Chi and other Chi practices can make people more broken than they were before. I've seen this.

Please note obviously those with mental health problems should be monitored by a health professional and seek their guidance on practicing Tai Chi dependant on their own personal medical history. Learn from a teacher whose mental state is balanced too, not one who exhibits signs of not eliminating or at least taming their own personal 'demons'. Watch out for the paranoid, easily angered, or especially the overtly or covertly manipulative. They ultimately haven't learnt a thing worth teaching.

Depression still carries an element of stigma. Stuff that!-Don't suffer alone, its a miserable thing to do. Nothing wrong in asking for help.

11. What's the best style of Tai Chi?

A very common question. I don't think there is a 'best' having learn three major and different styles pretty well, and styles within style too. So only just different, not better, different strengths and purposes yes, but none the perfect or best. Its often a childish thing to look for or name something the best. People are always looking for perfection, looks, cars, even religions- it doesn't exist in this world. Many forms of marketing some obvious some not, trying to convince us we can have it, best to let that go in my opinion. Lot of marketing in Tai Chi too, most of it just based on greed and wanting to be the big wig of the Tai Chi world.

There's an old martial art saying that kinda goes ' there are good practitioners of bad styles, and bad practitioners of good styles'. Be careful of those standing on a soap box and proclaiming 'My style is best, 'most complete', 'the authentic', 'im the only one to know this it as Im a lineage master/select student', blah blah blah. Its just unfortunately usually so much marketing bunk and hyperbole. If not out right lies. This is nothing new. Old as the hills as the saying goes, even in China in Tai Chi's and other martial arts heydays. The market place was full of different schools performing trying to get new students. The better ones didn't need too, but weren't immune to the 'hard sell'.

Look to the teacher and ask yourself if they have qualities and abilities you want that would be useful to you. Not the style unless you have a particular preference. If they don't have anything you like, well their tai chi might still be the equivalent of solid gold and focus and go with that and try to ignore their personal failings. Or go elsewhere if you find them too different to you or difficult to deal with. Tai Chi for some is a career and its deeper aspects haven't always rubbed off on them. My fondest teachers were and are not famous, particularly successful, nor made wild claims. That's not to say my least favourite were not very talented world famous geniuses. Personally I prefer my Teachers to be talented balanced human beings rather than the crazed but highly gifted. Just my preference, we all have our own. Tiger Woods is a great golf player but i wouldn't ask him advice on relationships, but I would ask him about my stroke {if I had an interest in golf that is}. I'll still train with someone I don't like, but its not easy and can be very counter productive. Choose teachers and styles according to your need, just don't be looking for something from a fantasy, as no one or no thing is perfect. If you want the good information it might not come easy or packaged in someone you like unfortunately.

I would say also its what you want to get. For the majority of people who just want a relaxation exercise a short form regardless of style is probably best for them. Short forms are not popular with purists but few people ever finish learning long forms even as just basic movements. Most styles now have short forms {even though they originally complained about them}, the '24' or 'Simplified Tai Chi' was the first one to gain popularity world wide, based on the Yang Style. Its the first short form I learnt in the 80's {apart from a short Wu it was the only main one about }, and still my favourite short form for beginners. Its a great intro form for a beginner though I know some Teachers who don't like it. Its still the official standard Short Form the Chinese teach in state run associations. Im not saying that's the greatest vindication mind you, just that it does work for beginners pretty well. For those

serious about Tai Chi short forms are just beginners stuff, you leave behind once you advance. As I teach them though I practice them so I practice what I preach.

12. What's the best way to get really good at Tai Chi?

Practice. Practice. Practice. Obvious easy and very dull reply sorry, but it works. Being relaxed while energised is pretty important too.

Don't worry about instant results, nor time in general. But that's easy to say, talk about and the like, but often really tedious to do. Few can look beyond the week ahead or have the patience to see something through that's not instantly rewarding. Having a good teacher too who can really help you through the beginning and get you off to a head start. Videos can help those who can't find a teacher, or if they see them only irregularly, but they can never replace a teacher to guide you.

Standing in static 'Postures' is fundamental and the trad method. It creates the right physical structure and corrects alignments. Makes the legs strong and pliable, and can increase bone strength and mass. The Chi guided or not, can be led out of the upper body and brain, where it shouldn't stay for long anyway, into the lower Tan Tien and legs, which is the best antidote for many stress related probs that many have. It relieves a lot of stress on the heart for instance. Standing can upgrade the function of the spine and organs which as we all {hopefully} know healthy organs and spine are a must for good robust health.

Try the eight postures of Peng, Lu Ji, An, Zhou, Kau, Lie, Cai plus the most yang{Single Whip} and the most yin{ Play the Guitar}. That's regardless of style an accepted traditional practice which produces results. Start with a minute in each and build to about a max unsupervised of twenty minutes altogether, or one posture for twenty. There're are a number of other standing methods from other styles too, and just simply part of Chi Kung training.

Those classes that don't teach standing aren't worth much in my opinion. They are going to be good for some nice relaxation instruction, but that's about it. You'll never going to get the really good stuff. For results go the trad route.

13. I read a lot about Internal Strength in Tai Chi. What is it and how do you get it?

Ah the Tai Chi 'Million dollar' question my friend- and that's meant literally- sometimes you will pay a lot of money to get the 'how to do, how to get'. That's historic and still prevalent. No guarantee you're get anything worth while though even if you empty your bank account into a teachers. Been down that route, but not as badly as some I've known, but still have spent a lot of time and

money. Beware.

I'll give the standard reply- first standing, with correct methods {stillness of mind, relaxation of the body and mind, breath and chi work}, and dedicated practice. That is holding postures. They are the best way for gaining strength of this kind. Different styles have different methods. Separate Chi Kung sets are often used too. {Please also see the question on 'Five Elements' and 'What's the best way to get good at Tai Chi'}

Please see Stuart Olsens Book on 'Cultivating the Chi' for an abbreviated set of the {New}Yang Style Tai Chi Chi Kung postures, and other Yang Style methods, and Mantak Chias 'Iron Shirt Chi Kung' an abbreviated set of postures {24 are the whole set} of a Wu Style based methodology. I've trained in, and teach both. The first is easier for the weak, the second more suited to the fit and strong, but that may not always be the case, too many variables.

The type of power and ability that the old masters had is probably extinct - no one trains as they did, no one needs too. I've heard lots of wild stories but yet to witness some of the more zany feats of internal power. Im open minded though.{ This reply pre dated 'You Tube' and the films and clips listed under 'Internal Strength'}

The best kind is that you have vitality enough to get on with a productive healthy life, disease free, fulfilling all your wishes and potentials. A lot of martial artists destroy their bodies and minds trying to become super heroes. Feats of internal/ external strength can wear you out prematurely. Whether that's taking repeated blows to the body or breaking objects, moving incredible weights etc. Its an ego trap and dead end. I've done some of those things so I know what it does to you negatively.

14. I often have too much energy from my practice- I don't know what to do with it. Any suggestions?

Funny isn't it, most want more energy in there life's, but in Tai Chi and other arts we have to deal with often having too much. This can be very common. I've experienced myself as well as the polar opposite of not enough. Practice the Forms with a deeper stance, breathe deeply and slow the time it takes to complete the form. Meditation, 'Venting' or calming the energy with various breathing methods can help too.

Bringing energy down from the higher centres and brain is a must if you can feel this, as too is storing it safely in the lower Tan Tien. If that doesn't work or you're not at that point yet use the extra energy positively. That is rather than trying to just 'let off steam' through destructive methods {too much sex, alcohol, drugs etc} which is what most non trained individuals do when they feel over energised. This is not the Tai Chi way, its just about depletion without storage. Manual labour like gardening is very

good {its how i built a garden}, chopping fire wood and the like, or practice more difficult forms like the weapons sets if known. That's what there there for. All this is no different than what the Shaolin Monastery guys did and do to balance their high energy practices. Its also practical.

For those who aren't energetically sensitive a good bet is just to get fit. Go for a run if your knees are in good shape, but don't over do it. Swimming is a better fitness option.

15. What is Yin and Yang in Tai Chi? Not being rude but Im stumped and it seems a lot of mumbo jumbo to me!

Most are stumped and you're right it can be a load of MJ!.... Don't worry about the theory or finding it in yourself, until you really know a form without having to remember the next move and so more components.

But so not to shirk the question entirely, look at it like this. Lots of ways to use Yin Yang theory. Medicine, Art, Science and of course exercise. For instance in Tai Chi moving forms are 'Yang' in relation to stationary which are 'Yin' in comparison. Its always in relationship to each other. Yang is not independent of Yin. The relationship that exists is the understanding and use. Moving forms are Yang in comparison but within them they have Yin and Yang components. If you're moving forward its Yang, backward Yin, Moving up Yang, moving down Yin. But nothing is an absolute. Within Yin is Yang within Yang is Yin. If not their is no harmony, and more importantly 'creation' or 'control/destruction. That's like this when we are active with have a certain amount of energy to expend {yang potential} until we get tired or use that Yang- then we need rest- or Yin. Yin creates Yang, that is rest will recoup your energy through digestion of food and body repair. We all need rest. So working for instance with the Yin modes of practice in practice we can engender repair and thus create a potential for yang.

Martially Punching is obviously more Yang in comparison to Pulling which is more Yin. However both still contain their opposite. A pull can become a punch, a punch a pull.

An extrovert is a Yang personality, an introvert a Yin type. Some Tai Chi'ists are very Yang types others very Yin. Chen style is more Yang in nature than other styles and suits extroverts. I practice methods according to my mood or what mood I want to create. Finally Yang is practice, Yin is rest. Do both! Over doing neither.

16. Can you do weights and Tai Chi, my teacher says no, but you said it depends on what you want to get. Can you say more?

Classically weight training as we would understand it, was forbidden, a real no no. Certainly as far as i know in the Yang Family. For many it causes more problems than benefits. Not all Tai Chi players agree, and having done a lot of shaolin style weight training in wing chun {there we were told not to use heavy weights only light, many in WCKF don't use them at all} and after, and having used heavy weapons I don't say don't, I just say be aware, and beware. The Shaolin way is many reps, sometimes in the 1000's, and running with weights on wrists and arms, throwing and catching weights while running jumping etc, that kind of thing. Actions that mimic actual moves. Historically Shaolin trainees moved, hit, lifted very heavy if not crazy weights. As with modern weight lifters this exacts a tremendous toll on the body. Least if they were monks they could balance their practice with meditation and energy circulation. I've only met one pro body builder who meditated, and that was towards the end of his career. As a note the acceptable use of weight training in Tai Chi is heavy weapons.

Weights are very Yang compared to Tai Chi, which in these terms is very Yin compared to weights. Lots of problems are caused with weights apart from increased injuries to joints and ligaments. Also tense muscle doesn't move well or dextrously. Meridians can be squeezed and restricted by over developed muscle. Some Tai Chi'ists though use light weights to develop raw punching power, but from the energy purists point of view, which I do agree with most of the time, this is still Shaolin/external and not internal work at all. So I say its what you want. I've rarely only ever done Tai Chi in my life. Some have and they may be better off for it I don't know. I've done yoga simultaneously, which has a lot of similar processes to shaolin, and I've worked with weights particularly in my twenties, ran, and did cardio in other ways.

The other classic statement is 'tai Chi will help your weight training, weight training wont help your tai chi'. Id agree if the weights are heavy {that is you cant lift it more than 20 times} I didn't go to a gym for over ten years a one point but i was still lifting heavy objects in jobs {antique fireplaces which i renovated and delivered} teaching yoga, and later building gardens with very heavy sculptures and rocks. Most of my adult life has had a lot of manual labour in it. My Tai Chi practice has saved and repaired my back on more than one occasion.

Body types are an issue too, only stocky types have the means and structure to lift heavy objects well, Im lean and it caused me some real problems that I had to repair with Tai Chi.

I think though as so many do weight training now they would all really benefit from doing Tai Chi, while still enjoying their regime. Some even switch as they get older to doing Tai Chi completely.

17. I don't understand what's meant by 'Internal' or 'External'. Can you help?

Many don't, so don't worry, and often they're teachers! Internal and External firstly are not always just the way of Tai Chi or Kung Fu. There are internal methods and styles in Shaolin too, and some tai chi is nothing more than slow external kung fu.

However the most usual way in which these terms are used are whether a style uses tense muscle, raw physical power and force from the bones{'external'}, more than relaxed muscle, tendon{sinew} power and chi development including developing the esoteric anatomy of the body, including the energetic pathways and the power of the mind{'internal'}. Please see books by Bruce Frantzis for clarification and great information on the energy body.

18. What's the difference between Large, Medium and Small Frame.

Two ways they are defined.

Firstly the same identical form practiced in three ways or 'sizes'. 'Large'-expanded stretched out movements where the movements are very linear or very large obvious circles. Low stances where typically the thighs move parallel to the ground. This develops raw power, stamina, the correct muscle groups and opens up the body much like yoga does. The 'Tai Chi Body' if you will. Obviously this kind of work is tough and not very relaxing at first. The Form is obvious and creates the structure of the Tai chi for the practitioner in concrete ways. Linear movements with simple circular movements are easier to learn for the novice. Next 'Medium' postures. Higher postures, movements closer to the body, where there are more rounded and the beginning of inter linking spherical moves. Beginning of developing deep relaxation and Chi awareness through a softer body. This is the most typical method practiced. Lastly 'Small'- high and short stances, and compact and intricate multilayered movements, of either slow and very minimal external appearance, or rapid flux of interwoven circles, spheres and spirals. With this method the whole body appears to undulate in a boneless manner. This way is practiced and truly understood by very few. As a note doing Tai Chi with small high movements as many elderly do isn't really a true small frame tai chi. Its just an adjustment according to health and ability.

So theoretically you can take any tai chi form and and practice it in these three ways, if you learn the ways how.

Next definition which seems to be the more original one. Three Forms but not with identical movements. Its said Yang Lu Chan only practiced the small frame, his Son Yang Chien Hou developed the other two frames.

These three forms are sometimes referred as Snake, Tiger, and Crane styles by Yang Stylists.

19. Why have you made up your own weapons forms? They look quite complex and difficult.

Firstly they just kind of happened as part of exploring my forms. I didn't set out to develop forms it just kind of happened as a part of my personal progression and investigation into the principles of Tai Chi in relation to working with objects in the hands.

What is traditional is that they arose out of two different ways to practice Tai Chi. There is 'regular' practice-that is the forms are practiced as proscribed, and 'free style' practice where you practice according to your feeling, sensation of Chi, and individual expression as it occurs in the moment. Done this way a form is never the same twice. I practiced regular Forms for decades to get to this point.

I make it very clear that I didn't learn them from wispy bearded chinese guy who gave me, and only me, the secret special uber super duper form while we sat under a magic bean tree blah blah, or my dead teacher came to me in a special dream and imparted to me and only me anew secret form. I say this because it this happens a lot, I mean really a lot. Its been like this in China even before the martial arts got to the west.

Im not completely discounting that either of these kind of scenarios are 'possible', or have not happened, but the dream stuff is highly unlikely. There is however a martial traditional of being taught in dreams by ancestor spirits in China. Handy for giving credence and legitimacy to all your hard work. It should be remembered though were told the modern discovery of the spiral structure of DNA was inspired by a dream. So lets not discount it completely. Its just that it didn't happen to me. I've dreamt teaching sessions with my teachers, but they were always still alive. As for living old masters teaching special forms, the ones who really knew all the great info, they are are all long dead.

So I could sell my forms in ways that many would want to believe -we are constantly being sold our own egos and projections everywhere. But it would be just lies and there's too much of that going on. So its the simple and unglamorous truth that I created and developed them. In that way if they are any good in any way then someone better can come along and improve them, which I really do hope happens.

To answer your question though {occasionally I manage to do this} I wanted basically to do the opposite to 'simplifying' Tai Chi for the masses. Its been done, and done well, but those who have 'got it' often need something 'more'. There's practitioners out there that are so talented and limited to some dull mediocre watered down sets. Possibly im painting 'legs on snakes', and

assuming far too much of my own abilities to bring something new to tai chi, I'll leave those far more qualified than me, to judge my efforts. Personally they have helped me so hopefully they'll be of use to someone else too. If not relegate them to the junk heap of all that's a just waste of time;-}

Weapons forms are obviously mostly elaborate antiques-no one in their right mind walks around with swords, spears or a couple of Wind and Fire Wheels. As for knives well that's another story. Whatever the weapon form they are just the 'auxiliary equipment' of Tai Chi, for improving skill and health. That's not to say if you can use and understand them you can improvise and turn everyday objects in to weapons.

20. What's the single greatest advantage to doing Tai Chi in your opinion?

Good grief what a great question! Well there's what its like doing the practices, and what happens to one during that time, to the after effects afterwards when your not.

Life is stressful, so anything that can support us while we navigate everything life has to throw at us, that has got to be good. Especially if like Tai Chi it engenders a state of being focused but still, even peaceful, while comfortably robust and full of energy. Who doesn't want to feel that good! You can of course learn to feel or find peace from your stress in other ways, but may physically and/or emotionally suffer horribly. For instance alcohol is used by people to help them relax, but it can really mess you up if you over do it. Then again you can feel great physically and be a teetotaler, but be tormented by a zillion internal crazy demons that tear up your insides. We have to take care of both the physical and emotional side of our beings to create balance. Tai Chi is a great way to do this. Its not perfect, and just because you do it doesn't guarantee a perfect life. Many Tai Chi'ists are just like the rest of the population, they have problems even they can't solve, but the difference is they can learn to manage them so that they suffer less and at least have a relatively normal life. That can be crucial.

It usually takes a some work to make tai chi work well as stress relief, but I have seen people again and again who in one lesson without any previous training drastically feel better, happier and more relaxed, even having their first good nights sleep in years. For those who don't have this kind of life, or experince, they cant appreciate the enormity of such an accomplishment.

Learning that relaxing can make you powerful is a great tool, one many could utilise to maximise either their career or personal lives. Who wants to be powerless, but who in their right mind what's to destroy body and mind in the pursuit of happiness?

From a purely energetic point of view, and what you do with this energy and vitality is a personal choice, but Id say becoming sensitive to the natural life force and order of things surrounding us that is truely amazing. All the 'stuff' the ancient Taoists

wanted us to discover beyond good health, martial prowess etc. The 'Tao' if you wish. Hence all their hard work designing these arts for our benefit!

In that sense Tai Chi becomes the meditation and mediation between what's inside you what's outside you {nature, the planet earths forces, the planets, the stars etc} and how in fact there isn't a difference if you allow this symbiotic chemistry, this synergy to happen. Others have put it far better, but even then words are more than useless. Especially mine. Practice, exploration, and individual experince are the way. That's wordless;-}

copyright 2012 John Scott Petty