

## Why Learn Tai Chi?

### A personal view by John Scott Petty

If you are thinking about taking up Tai Chi, maybe the below information will be of help.

More and more people are learning Tai Chi, more even than just ten years ago. Tai Chi is no longer the pass time of the 'alternative', but has gone mainstream, available now in community venues, gyms and health clubs right across Europe and the USA. It has entered our common ground of everyday consciousness much as Yoga has, from appearances as an idea setting backdrop in advertising campaigns, to scenes in films and documentaries. Pretty good achievement for something that was unknown of in the west until the 1950's.

Like anything worth doing in life, learning Tai Chi all depends on really what you want from it. Or most importantly I'd like to suggest, what you need. Needs are not always wants, and vice versa. Also needs are not always known, wants usually are. Everything we need, want or do, has an underlying motivation or intent. In general our individual true motivation or intent is often unknown to us, maybe that's often for the best. Extreme circumstances can make it more obvious, or even more cloaked. Invariably we often just feel 'driven' by this unseen, underlying need, want or desire. Look at any first day of a department sell, or the hordes of fans screaming for a pop or film star. We all can be driven from a very vague to very precise often primal urge. Many prefer not to know what really lies beneath these daily wants and desires, the primal in us is very powerful but daunting bed fellow. It can be a real Pandora's box of self discovery if we do look inside though.

If an experience feels good we often do it, regardless of the consequences. Addictions are the result. People can end up quite lost and enslaved. Tai Chi too has its feel good factor and can be very captivating, it can be fun while relaxing. However I have to be honest, it can also because of its inherent challenges, make you want to give it up and go and do something far easier or more immediately 'entertaining'. It depends on the depth of self perception and ones experience so far in what 'entertaining' is. None of us enjoy the hard times of life, and there are degrees of trying to escape from these. Wising up to how to navigate life and its ups and downs rather than just run away from, is a process we all eventually need to go through. Tai Chi can help us do this.

Tai Chi is rightly known as a great adjunct to personal healing. Like a powerful medicine, while being be good for you, it can also be bitter to taste. No one in their right mind who needs a particular medicine refuses it even if it tastes bad. Only a

reluctance to be well would stop us taking it. We are strongly motivated to take it because of our dire need. As we look around, there are many dire needs affecting all of us right now. Tai Chi is one 'medicine' available to us. Its a medicine that becomes sweeter the more we ingest it.

Wisdom, gaining self knowledge, was a highly esteemed quality in the ancient world, and often deemed dangerous for the unprepared. Thus it was held back and reserved for the ordained, initiated or 'Chen few'. A more prevalent situation which still exists in many areas of modern life {mainstream religion, politics, economics etc.} This idea of 'special knowledge' was and is also a great way of maintaining power over others. 'I know/have, you do not, as you an unworthy' Or you can have at a price. Tai Chi is a method of finding out by oneself such knowledge, insight, the needs of both the body and mind. However directly by ones own efforts.

Lets be clear I don't believe tai chi will solve all the individuals or worlds ills, but it will certainly help with some if not many. In case needs are something un clear lets first identify ones basic needs.

Employment {or any method to provide basic needs e.g. money, shelter, food etc. legal or illegal}, rest/sleep/safety {try sleeping if you are in a dangerous or unsafe place. Many can't sleep well because their stress levels make the body perceive its in actual danger} are all necessities none of us can ignore. The majority of people can't escape these needs {even a recluse such as monk or nun}. We all have to have the basics of life to survive. The UN recognises this and makes stipulations about countries providing these basics for their populations. The facts that many don't is well known, something to remind ourselves in the affluent west when we feel, alone, sad, cold, or hungry. Gratitude for what the majority of us have here in the west is one possible achievement of learning tai chi {or any esoteric art}. Personally I see that as a need, gratitude, others may not.

With the 'basics' of life taken care of, you can learn via Tai Chi {as with yoga, meditation, chi kung, and others} to go inside yourself and find a depth and quality of life, with life long vitality. For many especially those using Tai Chi as an adjunct to a Spiritual life {regardless of religious believe-you can be of any faith and practice tai chi} all the manipulations of modern consumer culture and its dreams of self worth based on wealth and success seem genuinely so daft and time wasteing. They find vitality not from objects and concepts but directly from the life force of everything natural, in and around them. This isn't a new or unique observation. Jesus, Lao Tzu, the Buddha, Mohammed- they all commented on the pitfalls and dead ends of pursuing intoxication, wealth and fame. Both Jesus and Mohammed spent time in the desert away from society. Lao Tzu the ancient prominent figure in Taoism {Tai Chi is a buddhist/taoist hybrid art} left his high status state employment and disappeared into the high mountains. The buddha left the comfort of his palace as a prince, and his vast copious wealth, to live in a forest. As then as now, we can all develop the insight how we are ultimately happy when we consume and pursue less that is external to us

and our real needs.

Of course for our present consumer culture to survive {and im not recommending anarchy, revolution or the such to remedy our problems-many times what replaces what went before is a worse sibling} needs us to over want so that we consume by over spending, constantly. Tai Chi teaches you not to 'over spend' your own reserves as it depletes your life force, your vitality. The parallels can here then be drawn between energetic, physical, and financial well being. Your outer world and inner world are based on similar concepts. No one wants to be financially rich and but poor health wise. Our present world is 'broke' not only financially all of us are aware of that. We are the totality of what we do, if we allow it its either a positive or negative situation and or outcome. Many are waking up and learning to conserve, its no longer the situation thirty years ago when to be 'green' was seen as being a looney bearded, tree hugging, nettle tea drinker, a somewhat unhinged glint in ones weirdo's eyes. Now being green is a successful marketing strategy of multinationals. A part success at least then in our evolution.

By conserving outwardly and inwardly you learn to feel and perceive. Then you can become aware of not only your true individual needs, but of others, wider society etc. Self knowledge has to become empathic and extend beyond the self, to become compassionate of others situation, and not mere narcissic aggrandisement of ones own success. Tai Chi plays with this 'in and out' of perception {inwardly to ones core outwardly to ones effect on the world around} in its own way, developing and maintaining vitality at the same time, where otherwise it would depleted and even be lost.

So Tai Chi or any kind of exercise or self improvement system may fall into a needs and/or wants category. To me once it is a 'true' need, then you really have something, an real achievement. Once its in your bones, a part of your fabric of experince, Without daily practice you don't feel right, healthy, vibrant or positive in out look. Tai Chi to me is as important as daily fluid and food intake. I feel no difference between the two needs. Of course eating and drinking are innate to us. Tai Chi is a learned skill that takes time. Many obsess about the quality of food and wine, and indulge in excesses in pursuit of that kind of excellence, but at the expense of their health.

However sadly there are many experts and 'masters' who still haven't achieved this quality of need, and still treat their bodies terribly in some kind of macho bravado. Their Tai chi is still somewhere they encountered it as a beginner-something 'outside' of themselves, something that one day some how will miraculously penetrate their being, becoming their 'need', enlightenment if you wish. They say and do much, and very impressively, but behind the curtains of their performance they'll still the same as if they had never learnt any Tai Chi in the first place. Why? That's an answer they can only really answer, and it takes great soul searching and humility. We all have to make sure one's tai chi is a path of evolvment, not stasis. Whatever ones personal situation or status. 'Sitting on ones laurels' is a very comfortable place, and many do. Tai Chi is just a method, a tool, not a

guarantee.

Being clear on your intentions and really understanding your individual needs for learning is really helpful in the beginning and decades later when struggling through the huddles of expertise. We all need to know the 'what, why's and how's' of our goals.

For instance we all age, and our needs are constantly evolving. We adapt, or suffer. We also all get ill at some points in our life, some more and worse than others, so there again is change in need and want. Tai Chi can help you not get ill, and recover quickly when you do, its not a guarantee against that or any other misfortune. Karma binds the majority of us, even seasoned Tai Chi practitioners.

The situation of "I need/want to be better" demands an approach different from when one is well. There can be a complex mechanism behind those individuals who unbeknown or known to themselves, actually want to be ill, or even need to be ill. Every experienced and compassionate instructor in martial arts/yoga/meditation, or therapist/healthcare pro can tell you about this kind of human suffering from personal experince working with the general public.

Few people are naturals when it comes to learning Tai Chi. I've met some and even taught some, but most of us fall into the mediocre 'have to work hard at it , occasionally with a bit of 'tearing ones hair out' in frustration' camp. The 'effortless art' takes effort I'm afraid. No 'matrix' type scenario where martial arts is plugged into your nervous system like a computer program. As that is so, and may it stay like that for ever, a large percentage of people {usually the young} soon loose interest. That's not to say you wont have some experiences that wouldn't make a good story or chapter in a film.

My whole experince of all my forays in to all things 'eastern' since the 80's have had some 'hollywood moments' {wows and life altering events} but also many disappointments, dull repetition, toil, heartache and frustration, and much of what wouldn't make much of a good or exciting story. So I wont bore you here. The only talent I found I have in droves over the decades is stubbornness, or when virtuous reasoning smiles upon me- tenacity. Obsessiveness is its lesser cousin and one I try to use positively. Sacrifice makes a good story, the athlete who gives up some or all comfort for the ideal of the sports success. For every sports person that makes it, many scores do not. Its the same in Tai Chi but you can make it in ways no one will ever give you a trophy for. Its a Taoist observation that fame and success are just 'bolts of lightening'-no one knows where they land, who they'll hit, and they last but a second, so don't bother with it. A sports person may damage their bodies and mind just for a brief moment of glory. Unfortunately there are too many stories of the ageing sports person sadly unable to let go their days of youth and glory. In Tai Chi you reach your peak and can maintain it through your golden years. Another large percentage of people will now loose interest reading this, why because everyone wants that not to be true, that sports are just flashes in the pan of life.

The facts are as anyone realises, and the sooner the better, learning something or getting something worth while is not going to come easily, nor in a short time. Its why we like watching sports. Tai Chi demands that sometimes you have to train like a pro sports person, in fact there are competitions if you want them, but usually its just the need to get it and soar the wave of your own attainment that's enough of a 'trophy'.

Movies on great men and women and their achievements depict their achievements from start to finish, but with one less than obvious flaw. A life time in two hours is only a film, its not real life. That is where we are living, real time, although many try their best to live in a protracted fantasy via gameing, or excessive and obsessive following of the films and their 'stars'. Their lives merely a life support system to provide the time to fantasise. Most children {many adults too unfortunately} now are saturated with the idea of success based on stories rarely based on real or realistic premise, including how a novice becomes an expert in anything. Chose your hero whether in sports, science, music, film, crime, politics anything. We see years or even decades experince compressed into two hours to make a film. {That has to be around two hours because it was found that most audiences cant maintain any focus for anything longer. Those directors who make epics of three to even five hours have a tough time with studios pushing them get the film down to size.} For many decades are required for any real excellence. So relax, forget about time, that itch for constant entertainment and distraction, forget yourself, and just do. Sacrifice then is transparent.

Learning anything like Tai Chi is going to take time and effort. For a long time it may feel you're getting no where. The Chinese have a saying particularly well quoted in the field of martial arts, but it applies also to becoming good as a painter, calligrapher, carpenter, anything that requires a craftsmen's approach. They'll tell you to 'Eat Bitter'. The western poor and lesser equivalent is 'no pain, no gain'. This can apply but also can mess you up. 'Eat bitter' may also mean you got to put up with some emotional or physical pain, but also that you might have to learn to relax in the process, for instance the trials off learning to sit still and meditate. 'No pain no gain' usual creates a person who keeps on pushing beyond their limits and wont sit still for a moment. 'Eating bitters' are also a health aid known to assist to digestion. Knowledge and experince have to be 'digested' to become us the same as our food. If we do not digest and assimilate all that comes into us, it can cause problems. So the Chinese say eventually the eating of bitter becomes sweet, but the constant need for sweetness causes bitterness. The constant eating of sweet foods damages us, our teeth and the digestion. We see this manifest often as diabetes for instance. The 'sweet smell of success' in Hollywood can become a very bitter experince. The tabloid reader cruelly gloats over the falling from grace and loosing of youth of stars we once fawned over. Human nature at one of its many lows of compassion is a by product of the Hollywood machine. I've known and taught some Hollywood players so I talk from their experince. Its not pretty. Why do you think its called 'tinsel town' {'all that glitters is not gold' remember that one?}.

Our culture is built on the 'sweet' of instant gratification. Buy this and you will be happy. This car will grant you 'instant' sex/status appeal. This surgery will remove all the things you've spent decades doing to your body and mind. Joining a gym or a class seems good idea, then you go and find you have to actually exercise. Then you don't look like Arnold Schwarzenegger or Kate Moss, or move like Bruce Lee in a week, so you lose hope. Gyms make huge profits from these 'instant junkies' who continually pour through their doors year by year. I used to be a gym instructor so I saw this a lot. I now teach in a gym again, for the first time in nearly twenty years. Nothing really has changed people are people, but more are doing yoga and tai chi, which makes me smile.

The next story is typical of mine, and others instructors.

A city guy employed me as his personal trainer pre the big financial crash in the late 1980's. He was very thin, pale, energy less and wanted to put on weight. I asked him to fill out a diet sheet over a week to find out what he was eating. His diet was appalling. Mostly chocolate bars, lots of coffee and a main meal of a take away. I made suggestions and a diet plan for him. His shopping choices were still those of a child or student. The dangers of excess caffeine are well documented so no need to go over them here. Google and find out. But I've also seen personality changes in coffee drinkers who are sensitive to drugs in general, which is less well documented. Personally I don't drink the stuff unless like a drug it's an emergency need.

He lasted about four sessions. Why? He had many of the problems and misconceptions that inexperienced can have.

I showed him some basic stretches I wanted him to do so I could determine his ability. He politely but grudgingly obliged. He was very stiff even for someone his age. Then I did some press ups, sit ups, the usual basics, and how to do them correctly. I explained this again was so I could gauge his strength levels. He stood over me and said word for word, with a bemused look.

"So I have to do all this!! I don't just watch you? "

"Er yes", I said my jaw dropping.

"Oh" he said.

What was the problem. Well this nice chap, well educated, and well paid until he lost his job in a financial crash, couldn't quite get it that he would achieve his aims with some form of osmosis, being around someone who would do the exercises. I'm being quite honest here, he believed merely having a personal trainer would somehow make him fitter and healthy-like some magic trick {and it's often a status symbol or means to show off having a personal trainer}. I've seen this again in teaching Yoga and Tai

Chi, I've also heard similar stories from other trainers. The 'instant junkies' yet again. I do understand that to practice at home, maybe sweat, maybe ache, maybe get frustrated and bored isn't appealing. And to not get instant results, For months, years, for decades.

So you're reading this either considering learning Tai Chi, or you already are and you'll wonder what else this the old fool has to say because right now you can't possibly envisage spending time and money learning something that hard.

Firstly learn it because it's good for you. If you are into life insurance, do this it's a more or less guarantee that your old age won't be as awful physically. Also you won't be lonely as others will be interested in you as an old person who is limber well and full of vitality. Also it works even done badly. Do something badly in a yoga class or gym and it's gone and hurt you. Maybe permanently. The sooner you start the better. However don't get all ageist on yourself. A old teacher was fond of telling us in the 80's about a guy he met in China. He started learning tai chi at 70. He started teaching at 90. It's never too late. Most start at 50 in China.

I started learning Tai Chi in 1984 at 19, with all that goes with being a such a teenager- the good, the bad, and the ridiculous. I wanted/needed to learn how to defend myself . I looked pretty weird-six foot two, eight and half stone, and a Mohican. I mostly dressed in all black, plus the uniform of chains,belts, spikes and just for good measure a pair of hand cuffs. I attracted a lot of attention. Most of it not too friendly. Fortunately I ran well. jangling all the way.

I tried some Tae Kwon Do and didn't like it. I liked the apparent effortlessnes of Tai Chi {I was quite lazy}. My first Teacher was small but could throw around people twice his size. These Chinese teachers and students thought I was hilarious. 'Funny Chicken', 'Skinny Chicken', 'Chicken Thin', were their politer nick names for me. Even these translations may have been kind, in truth it may have been worse, I don't remember the chinese names they called me. Health and longevity meant nothing to me. Not being beaten up by skin heads did. That was long time ago. Now my feelings are different.

Now that might sound impressive starting back then, starting that long ago or that young, it's not, it's just simply a fact. Impressive would have been if I'd been six. Or if I had been any good at it from the start, or even after six months. Now that maybe it would make a great and impressive statement. I wasn't. I'm still not very good at it compared to those I hold in high esteem. I'm still 'looking down the road' on the path I'm travelling on seeing them in the distance.

In that ligh old or middle age {as that's where I'm at now} can also be a time of reflection on all ones lost or left behind. Tai Chi can be a reflection of a life time of what you've gained and positively wisely lost.

Why?

Because as I've pointed out for most of us learning tai chi is really difficult, time consuming, infuriating, and just plain daft in some ways, particularly when you're young. One's peers or parents won't necessarily hold your enthusiasm for your obsession. Then you get good and people are jealous of you, or even take time out to intimidate you. In total you might feel misunderstood, maybe get demoralised by all this and more, or think perhaps they'll all right - Tai Chi, contemplating your navel, all that jazz, it's all a waste of time. But you keep going, friendless, status less, and broke. That's until until the day dawns and you wise up and see what you've gone and learnt, who you've become, and realise it's the best decision you ever made. For me at 19, personally, as funny skinny chicken boy.

No one probably wants to hear that it takes effort or that others may not support you. That you will encounter situations unpleasant or dangerous. We all want an easy life. Many of us settle for the over simplified, denatured and without passion or the chance of loss. I see it something most likely akin to heating tinned soup, and taking a piece of sliced white out of its packet and toasting it, and thinking that's good food. We fool ourselves about the real quality of our life's all the time. This is why many are sold all the fads and tricks advertising and marketing. Particularly about health. 'Get slim in two weeks', 'eat what you want and loose weight', 'a beach body in ten easy steps', 'rich in five sure fast ways', 'gym free abs' etc. We can all be suckers and believe such trite given the right spiel. Learning the basics in Tai Chi in 10 weeks maybe possible, but are you prepared for the work that entails? Seven days a week, ten hours a day. Make it easy on yourself spend at least 6 months. But as I said earlier forget time. Many of my and other teachers students get health improvement from their very first class. No gym or crazy exercise fad can offer that. If Tai Chi is a fad, it's the longest lasting one with the greatest number of adherents I've come across, with at least 20 million practicing daily in China.

If you are someone with no patience or want instant, like buying into quick fixes, firstly you'll have to change your perception, mentality, your outlook. However don't do the self blame thing, that stops people sticking to things too or believing in themselves. Regardless of wanting to learn tai chi or not. Again just relax, forget pressure from you or others and just do. If your teacher makes you feel bad, probably not the right teacher for you.

If you do start to learn Tai Chi, I whole heartedly congratulate you making a very good life style choice. So many life styles are far from healthy, but many have no alternative to them. Many work in dangerous, hazardous or simply stressful work places. Few of us have an ideal life, let alone work environment. These and all the additional stresses of family life were well observed in the ancient world. The health practices that arose out of the Indian sub continent and Asia in general were a response to the hazards and difficulties of human life. The world has changed, and in many ways human life is easier. But there is still suffering.

Tai Chi is just one method to alleviate it. Look at it from any angle and that is its purpose, martial, meditational/spiritual, or health. Relieve personal suffering.

Tai Chi is endless in its ability to improve oneself. You can never say really 'I know Tai Chi' only 'I know some tai chi'. Beware those you say they 'have it' or have 'Mastered' it. I think that's a very limited self appraisal and blind alley better not to be in trapped in. It maybe these practitioners simply want to feel and be identified as 'masterful', drawn from personal experience of insecurity, or to gain status after a life time without. Few of us want to be servants or the down trodden, many come to tai chi feeling they are one or both. Both Teachers and students should be compassionate to those who have had that in life. They can still be great to be with. Those whose motivations are this and financial gain are best avoided altogether. If you're lucky they will sell you something worth having, but it will be still tainted by their maladjustment. Karmically they are the most lost of the lost. Beware their marketing and convincing you otherwise. Honestly I cant stress that enough.

Simply I say the sooner someone gets to that point of 'need', the sooner the better. Some of the best Tai Chi fighters don't get it, some of the worst do. Some of those who move beautifully don't get it, those who stumble about and make poor postures do. Some don't get it after 30 years, some get it after a week. Its a personal thing. It depends how open and committed to allowing change you really are. My position? Imperfect of course, Im constantly sitting on thorns, hoping they'll become comfortable like laurels!;-}

However here's a final point here, learning tai chi and sticking with it through thick and thin will teach you patience and stillness, a position where appreciation for the simple things in life arises. We all know Instant gratification's, extremes of behaviour, unpleasant people, denial of ones or the environments health, quick fixes, all aren't worth a hoot. So go ahead go for it, live a life worth living and remembering. You could make a difference in the big or small scheme of things.

Good luck!

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