



WANDERING

WARRIOR

Tai Chi - Mindful Movement for Vitality and Health

For this issue we are exploring the “softer” art of Tai Chi through Adam Montoya of the Desert Song Healing Arts Center. Adam teaches a Tai Chi form, inspired by all five Tai Chi styles, that he created himself. His personal practice and study is with the Chen Practical Method. (1) He teaches a style of Tai Chi that is a combination style that focuses on health and well-being.

THE CLASS

You could almost feel the calm emanating from the building. As you walked through the front doors, you were enveloped in a sea of bliss. Soft lighting, peaceful chanting, and delicate incense embraced you as you entered. “Welcome to Desert Song Healing Arts Center,” lilted a voice from behind the front desk; and with that, our Tai Chi adventure began.

Lady luck had smiled upon me as it just so happened that Adam had started a 3-week intro class the week before. Here was my perfect chance to join other would-be practitioners on their quest. It was interesting to discover what had brought the different classmates to this

introduction class. One woman was looking for a “moving meditation,” another was searching for a workout that was “less intense than yoga”. It was clear that all of them were enjoying the camaraderie of pursuing a new path with fellow explorers.

Before class, Adam had instructed us to set up a folding chair with a yoga mat spread out in front of it. He greeted us as he started class and then asked us to lay on our backs with our heads towards the chairs. Next, he invited us to notice the support that the earth offered us. “What an interesting perspective,” I thought. So, I gave it a try, and, yes, it was quite comforting to note that the earth supported my body completely without any muscular effort on my part. Next, he asked us to bring our feet up by our bottoms with the soles on the floor. He then instructed us to move our feet to the edges of the mat and let our knees touch.

Tai Chi

The Art of Moving Energy

by Jill Roth

"The core feminine qualities are acceptance, understanding, integration, and support"



Jill Roth
"Wandering Warrior"



"Hmm, where did all the stress in my lower back go?"

Following this, he encouraged us to keep our feet in the same spot but let our legs fall to the left. We stayed in this position for about a minute and again focused on how little we needed to do to support ourselves; gravity and the earth were doing all the work. "Hmmm, so if I harnessed the energy of the earth and used it as my support, I would be pretty connected and rather formidable," my little mind suggested. "Clearly this is going to be an interesting night of learning," I concluded. We balanced this movement by dropping our legs to the right and again spent a minute or so noting the effect.

Next, we placed the soles of our feet together and let our legs fall out to the sides (kind of like a frog) and again centered ourselves in this new position.

Finally, we rolled to the right, rested a moment then used our arms to push ourselves to sitting - no straining here, just centering, observing, and focus. Nice. We then rolled up our mats and prepared to do some movements while standing.

Adam then stood in front of the class and instructed, "Follow me." He proceeded to perform dozens of intricate and flowing movements. At first I panicked a little and

thought "Holy cow, this is the INTRO class?" But, then I relaxed into it and just did my best to follow.

During our interview later Adam commented on how fun it is to watch students as they release "thinking mind." This is exactly how it felt. When I quit thinking about it so much and just "felt" the form, it was fantastic. All the moves were done incredibly slowly and it was fun to recognize the weight shift required in Adam's body before he would be able to lift a limb. It became quite easy to tell which way his next move would go simply by paying attention to his body position and replicating it with your own weight distribution. You began to feel what must happen next just by the way your body was prepared.

Like watching a Hawaiian hula dancer, you suspected that each movement had a meaning, and a benefit. I felt that if I studied this art long enough I would be able to unlock these secrets. According to Dr. Yang Jwing-Ming, certain movements will heal or prevent illness in specific parts of the body. (2) Adam later explained that he designed his form to slowly open and balance his students.

I must say that towards the end, when the moves were getting more elaborate, I loved the way that it made me feel inside. I felt powerful and agile.

WARRIOR

Powerful may seem like a contradictory word here as each move is done intensely slowly, and your goal is to keep your muscles and mind completely relaxed throughout; but somehow it just felt bold to move in this way.

Adam later explained that many people believe that the body and Chi are separate, but the body and Chi actually are reflections of each other. When you open your body, you automatically open your Chi. When your Chi is open, your body can use energy better and the body becomes like a vessel utilizing the Chi. (**) Obviously, this is an art form that you could study for your whole life and never completely master.

After giving us a “taste” of what Tai Chi feels like, he went back to the beginning of the form and showed us the intricacies of the first couple of moves. This is where it really got fun. When you begin the form you stand with your feet about shoulder width apart and bend your knees. You then sink until you can feel your feet connecting with the earth. From here, you gradually sink until every part of your body feels like lead that has bonded with the earth except for your head. Your head is suspended above your neck as if you had a string tugging from the tip of your skull. It is amazing how grounded you feel.

In the next move, you mindfully raise your arms with a slight bend in them with relaxed wrists. This seems deceptively simple. If I asked you to pick up a glass of water, you would start with your bicep and pick it up. But here it is completely different. You sink into the lift and your arms come up as your elbows sink. Confused? We were to, so Adam did an awesome demonstration. He had each of us, in turn, push down on his arms. He showed us how it felt when he lifted with just his arms. It was very easy to hold his arms down. But then you could see his body sink into the earth and the movement came from his base. Each woman in turn fell off balance and giggled at their inability to hold his arms down. It was very cool!

He demonstrated a similar lesson with lifting our legs. Several times in the form you must lift your leg and step to a new location. But he explained we didn't want to lift that leg, but rather move our bodies in a way that the only

possible outcome is for the leg to raise. *What?* Again, I was struck by how cleverly he guided us to the answer. He had us stand near the wall and ease our weight onto the leg that would become the “base leg.” Then, gradually, we pushed against the wall and moved our energy into that base leg. Low and behold, at the tipping point, your other leg just rises, because you have set it up where there really is nothing else for the leg to do. *A WESOME!*

Now, here is the kicker. Imagine doing a form that lasts 15 minutes with each move being that intricate! No wonder Tai Chi is renowned for healing and focus. With that kind of centering you would be unstoppable!

All too soon, class was over. We had so much fun exploring the form that we didn't get a chance to meditate. Adam shared that he often has meditation at the end of class. There was no formal bowing in or bowing out with the class. We just quietly put our chairs and yoga mats away and said our goodbyes.

DEFINITION OF TAI CHI

Wikipedia defines Tai Chi as the following: “T'ai Chi Ch'uan training involves five elements: taolu (solo hand and weapons routines/forms), neigong & qigong (breathing, movement and awareness exercises and meditation), tuishou (response drills) and sanshou (self defence techniques). While T'ai Chi Ch'uan is typified by some for its slow movements, many T'ai Chi styles (including the three most popular – Yang, Wu, and Chen) – have secondary forms with faster pace. Some traditional schools of T'ai Chi teach partner exercises known as tuishou, pushing hands, and martial applications of the taolu's (forms) postures.” (3)

According to an article by Bruce Frantzis, there are five different types of Tai Chi. (4) He states that all Tai Chi styles are similar in that they develop Chi, use slow-motions, and flowing, circular movements. Yet, each of the styles focuses on different specific strengths and its practitioners espouse varied benefits. The five types are Yang, Wu, Chen, Hao and

WARRIOR

Combination. Yang is the most popular and widely practiced. Wu emphasizes small, compact movements. Hao is focused primarily on internal chi, and the physical movements are less important. Chen is known for a combination of fast and slow movements with jump kicks and stamping actions, and it is often preferred by the young and athletic. As you might expect, combination is a mixture of the other four styles. (4)

You may also find this martial art listed as T'ai Chi, Taiji, T'ai Chi Ch'uan, Taijiquan and Tai Chi Chi Kung.

YOUR QUESTIONS?

MSSD: *What are the benefits of Tai Chi for women?*

Adam: Tai Chi is unique in that it has many concepts that would normally be considered “feminine”. The core feminine qualities are acceptance, understanding, integration, and support. Practitioners are able to recognize how powerful these qualities are. In Tai Chi, we honor the feminine, and women can often appreciate these qualities and are receptive to the latent power in these traits. Often they quickly learn to see the conflict and are able to redirect it naturally. They also learn the power of combining masculine and feminine qualities to create a dynamic state of interacting in life that reflects the balanced nature of Tai Chi.

MSSD: *What kind of shape do I need to be in BEFORE I start?*

Adam: You can be in any shape. You just need the bare minimum. If you can move, get down on the floor, and get back up, you are good to go!

MSSD: *How invasive is it on the joints (knees)?*

Adam: That is a great question. Tai Chi isn't invasive on the body, we are invasive on the

body. Let me explain that. Tai Chi is an excellent mirror. It reflects for us habits in movement from our daily life by manifesting pain while we perform Tai Chi. Tai Chi will help reveal where we leak energy, and then with the instructor's help, we can shore up those movements. It is vital that the student shares with their teacher any pain that they're experiencing. With the teacher's guidance, Tai Chi can be instrumental in changing these ineffective movement patterns and habits.

On a deeper level, Tai Chi can even help us change the patterns in our thoughts. Some thought processes add peace and tranquility to our practice and lives. Some thoughts add stress and put us out of balance; for example, requiring us to push ourselves too hard or to rush to another task. Tai Chi will flag these thoughts through movements of the body. Your instructor might notice that your shoulders are raised and tight, or perhaps your head will be thrust forward. These are reflections of how we are internally out of balance. With guided practice, these thoughts and habits can be eliminated.

MSSD: *Many people practice Tai Chi solely for its health benefits. If a student is interested in the more martial aspects of the art, when is that introduced?*

Adam: The martial aspects would be integrated right away. This would be done on a one on one basis. I would be instructing the student on their individual habits and patterns. Tai Chi isn't really focused on specific techniques, rather, on the principles of moving the body. There are many applications that could manifest from one move.

In the Principle Method, we expect 8 applications for each move. We study how to utilize your body and how this is applied. It sounds contradictory because we aim to generate movement from stillness. If you can allow your body to be anchored, you will have more power. Naturally, this takes years to master. This type of internal study will change your whole life.

MSSD: *Will I get hit/kicked in the face?*

Adam: The purpose of our classes is for developing balance, coordination, and tranquility of mind and body so we can invite more of that into our lives. Our form is practiced slowly, and we don't practice any sparring in class; so the chances of getting kicked in the face are close to none. Our main focus is on the form as a tool for self-cultivation.

MSSD: *How often do I need to go to class per week?*

Adam: I recommend two times per week, but many of my students can only come to class once per week. Each time you will learn a little more, and you will progress at your own pace.

MSSD: *Can women in their 40's start?*

Adam: Absolutely! Tai Chi is great for any age. Many people think of it as an art for adults, but young students enjoy it as well.

MSSD: *Is it competitive like Karate?*

Adam: There is an aspect of Tai Chi that is competitive. There are tournaments to attend if you wish, and judges judge the students on their forms.

Tai Chi can be an extremely lethal martial art. A non-combative measurement of the person's skill level needed to be developed. From this necessity, "pushing hands" was invented. Pushing hands is similar to sumo wrestling in that it is a competition to see who can remain centered and who will be pushed off balance. Pushing hands has slightly different rules, but it is a great measure of the control a person has over their own Chi. When working with a master, you often don't even know why you moved. It is such a great force and you just find yourself in a different position.

MSSD: *What kind of health benefits/results can I expect?*

Adam: Tai Chi is extremely powerful. It has a balanced holistic approach to your health. It is all based on how your body functions. We believe

that the circulation of blood flow and oxygen is key to good health. This develops more nourishment through physical application of the body and maintaining a tranquil mind. When this is all in balance, it allows homeostasis.

Jill's Note: In his book, Dr. Yang Jwing-Ming quotes an old saying of Taoists that practiced Tai Chi. "One hundred and twenty means dying young." They believed that Tai Chi could considerably lengthen your life. (2)

MSSD: *How quickly will I experience benefits?*

Adam: From your very first lesson. Students often get a sense of well being almost immediately.

MSSD: *What are the levels of expertise? Is there a belt system?*

Adam: Though all schools are different, most schools focus on your knowledge level. There really aren't belts in Tai Chi. We really just focus on the knowledge level of the student. There is often a non-formal recognition of skill development between the student and instructor.

MSSD: *Are there forms and one steps?*

Adam: We do practice a form. Usually it is just one form per style of Tai Chi. For my classes I have developed a form that is inspired by all 5 styles of Tai Chi. It starts with smaller movements and slowly increases to quite powerful movements at the end. This opens up the student's body and Chi. Our form lasts about 15 minutes when performed completely. A student will consistently perform the same form. Over time, they will gain a deeper understanding, and therefore, deeper benefits from the same movements.

Jill's Note: Can you imagine how powerful you would be if you developed the ability to truly focus for 15 minutes in a row? You would be unstoppable!

MSSD: *What respectful behavior is expected of me?*

Adam: The class is usually broken down into four parts: relaxation and gentle stretching, group form practice, meditation, and last, individual study of the form. During each phase, I expect the student to

WARRIOR

focus on what they are doing and spend the time focusing on learning as much as they can. Other than that, my class is informal. You can address me at any point in the class if you have a question except when we are all practicing the form as a group or if I am working with someone individually. At the end of the class I usually bow to the students and say the sanskrit word "namast"e which means, "I honor the light that you are." Students can bow in return if they want to.

MSSD: What footwear do I use? What if I don't want to go barefoot?

Adam: Most students do go barefoot: however, if this is uncomfortable for a student, flat, comfortable shoes would be fine.

MSSD: Is everyone in the class a beginner?

Adam: After the 3-week intro class, all the students join into one class together. We perform the form once together, and then I ask them to do what they know. The students will then do the form at their own pace. Each student is practicing the moves at their own level. It is very organic, as students will ask a specific question about one segment of the form or another. Students often learn by observing another student's questions and then grow together.

MSSD: What can a student do for homework inbetween classes? Is it good to do this on one's own?

Adam: Yes, this is a very good idea. This is an excellent way to absorb the information and make it part of your life. This will make your next class easier, and you will be building upon your foundation, resulting in a great wealth of knowledge. It is important to be comfortable with where you are in your growth, yet, it is exciting to see when you are making progress. As an instructor, it is fun to watch my students as they move along their path.

THE STATS

Required Uniform? No

Nationwide price range? \$40-\$75 per month.

What is the flooring? Natural wood

Are there women in the school? Yes! Women feel very comfortable in our classes.

Can you accommodate physical challenges? Yes. I can with the help of the student. The student must be willing to not compare themselves to other students. Tai Chi adapts to the practitioner.

How physically exerting is it? On a scale of 0 to 10 (0 = sloths are confusing me for a tree and 10 = there may have been gasping), 1. The goal of Tai Chi is to have a completely relaxed mind and body. Tension or exertion could block the flow of energy.

Age limit? none

"Martial" versus "Art" scale between 1 to 10:
1 = ART, completely an internal art no combat 10 =MARTIAL - This is down and dirty combat moves only.

This is dependent on which form of Tai Chi that you pursue. If you choose one that focuses on health, then it would definitely be a 1. A more martial style would probably be a 3. You wouldn't experience out and out combat, but you might get a chance to compete in pushing hands.

(1) *You can learn more about Master Chen Zhonghua and the Practical Method at www.practicalmethod.com*

(2) *The Essence of Tai Chi Chi Kung, Health and Martial Arts, by Dr. Yang Jwing-Ming.*

(3) *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T'ai_chi_ch'uan*

(4) *www.taichimaster.com*

** Dr. Yang Jwing-Ming helps us understand the Chinese concept of Chi. "Chi is the energy or natural force which fills the universe." There are three general types of Chi." (4) The Chinese believe in Heaven Chi, Earth Chi, and Human Chi. They believe humans should always be in balance with the other two types of Chi. He further explains, "The western world has begun to accept the concept of Chi, equating it with the bioelectricity circulating in the human body."