



Greetings!

I hope you are enjoying the summer, and have had a chance to take your tai chi practice outdoors. There is still ample time during the fall to practice outdoors before the temperature gets too cold. With reports of mosquito borne West Nile disease occurring in many parts of the US, please take precautions when practicing outdoors. Put on insect repellent, wear long pants and long sleeves, and avoid dawn and dusk hours when mosquitos are most active.

September 23-27, 2024 is National Falls Prevention Awareness Week, to coincide with the first day of fall (September 22). Dr. Paul Lam's Tai Chi for Arthritis and Fall Prevention is one of many evidence-based programs recommended by the National Council on Aging. More information on the program can be found [here](#).

In addition to improving balance for older adults, the skills learned in any type of tai chi can be helpful to younger adults and children to master movement on the ice, not only to skate safely but to command the ice.

Insight Sharing - Mental Aspects of Tai Chi

Tai chi is as much about the mind and brain as it is about the body. How so? I enumerate the various areas in this article.

1. Movement itself is an activity of the brain. Sports therapist and author Joanne Elphinston states that “movement is the brain visibly expressing itself” Indeed, the complexity of the coordinated body movements in tai chi requires so much mental effort that a New York Times journalist exclaimed

that her brain felt like solving a Rubik's cube during her first tai chi lesson. Tai chi is as much an exercise of the brain as it is an exercise for the body.

2. Memorization and recall of the tai chi form is clearly a brain function. Playing a form from memory is necessary to free up mental bandwidth to incorporate tai chi skills during forms practice and to progress to higher levels of tai chi skill. It is also a pre-requisite for playing the form meditatively (see below).
3. The sensing skills of proprioception, interoception, and exteroception are brain functions responsible for body awareness, and the sensing of one's internal state and external environment. Examples of interoception include the sensing of pulse, temperature, satiation, breathing, muscle activation. In tai chi, we use exteroception to sense the pressure distribution under our feet to determine where our center of gravity is; we use proprioception to sense where our body parts are in physical space; and we use interoception to manage breathing and to sense the condition of muscles, ligaments, and the forces being transmitted through the body structures. Interoception skills have been recognized as critical for recognizing and managing emotions and have even been integrated into the curriculum for schools in Australia.
4. According to a *Frontiers in Psychiatry* article, "tai chi is an exercise that modulates the activity and connectivity of key brain regions involved in depression and mood regulation, ... which improves emotion regulation and reduces stress." The upright postures and expansive movements in tai chi contribute to emotional well-being and a sense of confidence.
5. Tai chi can be practiced as a moving meditation. Any kind of movement, combined with a focused mind, can be considered moving meditation. Competency in the movement is needed for it to become meditative. In tai chi forms practice, there are many movement skills that one can select from as the subject to focus on while practicing the form. Practicing the tai chi form meditatively helps one to develop mindfulness. Eventually, one can turn this mindfulness into a flow state, with benefits to psychological health and well-being.

The takeaways from the above:

1. Tai chi as an exercise of the brain: have patience with yourself if you feel that learning a new form is daunting. It will become easier with practice.
2. Memorization: If you haven't already done so, try to memorize your chosen tai chi form. It is essential to reap more health and wellness benefits. It also strengthens the brain and prevents cognitive decline.
3. Exteroception, proprioception and interoception: try to pay more attention to these sensations, not only during tai chi practice, but also during your daily activities. Interoception is essential for sensing qi flow.
4. Tai chi postures: try to move with intent, and hold an upright posture during your tai chi practice.
5. Moving meditation: this requires playing the form competently from memory as a pre-requisite. Once achieved, try to focus on one tai chi skill during each forms practice. Skills to choose from include: sensing pressure distribution under each foot to manage balance during postures and movement, moving continuously, moving with gentle resistance, keeping lower back straight, pandiculating the limbs and spine, placing the foot before shifting weight during stepping, sinking the weight onto the new weighted foot, ensuring myofascial connectedness throughout the kinetic chain (biotensegrity and anatomy trains) and creating and managing the flow of forces from the feet all the way to where it leaves the body and into the imaginary opponent. Once a mindful, meditative movement is achieved, flow state can be entered. Read this article for more information: [What a flow state is and how to achieve it](#).

While any movement in itself is a brain function and all movement exercises also exercise the brain, the other mental aspects and their resulting benefits, are dependent on your efforts to follow the associated actions.

Figure skating has many similarities with tai chi, regarding the mind and brain, especially in the areas of interoception, postures, moving meditation, and flow state. In mindful skating, areas of focus can be any one of the following: edge quality, structural alignment (central longitudinal axis lined up with dynamic plumb line, for most elements), pressing downward using the whole body (including arms, core, legs), as well as the rapid-fire sequence of internal forces and body movements associated jumps and spins. Skating a well-practiced program or a sequence of extemporaneous elements can be very meditative and flow state-inducing.

Hopefully, this article has helped you understand how the brain and mind are involved in tai chi and figure skating and the ways that you can better utilize these aspects during your practice.

With Warmest Regards,

Vincent Chun, PhD

If you find this article to be useful, please feel free to forward it to others.



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