



Berkshire Tai Chi



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De-mystifying Tai Chi

In both the East and the West, Tai Chi is shrouded in myth and mystery. There are two main causes for this. On the one hand there is the cultural dimension and on the other a piecemeal approach to the subject.

It may come as a surprise that many Chinese also struggle to get past the more esoteric aspects of Tai Chi.

Tai Chi was developed over 350 years ago. Cultures change, as do scientific understanding and cultural preoccupations. For many modern Chinese, the arcane pronouncements of long-gone generations seem hard to grasp.

Mystery fills the vacuum left when there is lack of any structured and cohesive theory. As Master Chen's cousin, Xiaowang, says, when we see only the manifestation of Tai chi with no explanation of the principles behind it, it is fantastical and mysterious. When we have structured knowledge, a cohesive framework within which to understand and replicate effects at will, then we have science. Tai Chi is science.

In an interview with BBC Radio's "Eastern Horizon" Grandmaster Chen Zhenglei presented his views on how to take Tai Chi forward into the 21st century. Extracts from this interview are presented here.

Grandmaster Chen Zhenglei:

"The biggest setback for Tai Chi and all martial arts was during the Cultural Revolution when people were not able to practise freely and martial arts became outlawed. Tai Chi...diminished in China. When China opened its gates again to the rest of the world, its rich culture was promoted and martial arts became standardised and simplified in the process.... Ultimately [they were] diluted and the virtues of the traditional form [were] changed. There is a lot of imitation Tai Chi out there, and the public do not know the difference.

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The philosophy of Tai Chi Chuan is profound, deserving of a lifetime of research and study. Because this philosophy was formulated in an age when there was insufficient scientific knowledge to clearly explain its subtleties, some training methods and theory were explained in abstract or spiritual language suited to that era. However, this can easily lead to misinterpretation and mystification of the theories, especially amongst modern-day Tai Chi Chuan enthusiasts, and with beginners. For example,



what is *Tai Chi neigong*? How do you explain “*Dantien rotation*”? Many people practise a lifetime but are still unable to resolve [such] questions.

Through prolonged practice and training, when the body’s joints are loosened, the tendons are stretched and elongated, when all parts of the body are co-ordinated in motion, and every gap between the joints has developed elasticity, the stretching of the tendon added to whole body co-ordination is what is known as *Taiji neigong*.

Traditional Tai Chi practice involves what is known as *Dantien rotation*. [This] is simply the requirement for a person to focus on the *Dantien* region during practice..... Concentrating on the *Dantien* region has several benefits: it can lower the body’s centre of gravity making the lower plane very steady and balanced; it enables massage of the internal organs to increase the functions of those organs; it can focus the intent so that when you are practising your *chuan* (boxing) you are actually resting your mind; [it enables] the execution of *Dantien* breathing (abdominal breathing) which increases lung capacity. So, *Dantien* rotation is a practice requirement of Tai Chi Chuan and is nothing mysterious. Where is the *Dantien*? In your abdomen, besides your internal organs, there is no such organ. However, if you use an abstract explanation you can say that it is created by long practice. People with a high level of skill have a distinctive feeling as if there is a sphere in the abdomen that is turning as you are [performing] Tai Chi.

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Chinese culture is steeped in allegory and religious beliefs that cannot be explained in practical terms. This gives some people the opportunity to exploit and perpetuate a condition by using myth to explain a superstition or superstition to explain a myth. If people are not mindful they can easily be [led down the wrong path]. In the last twenty years Tai Chi Chuan development and teaching has – intentionally or unintentionally – been influenced and affected by this phenomenon. Using ambiguity to explain something that is quite practical is detrimental to the art.

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Traditional Tai Chi Chuan studies have many abstract writings. How do you sort it out in your mind? If the texts cannot be explained in practical terms, if you cannot use them to elevate your Tai Chi Chuan skill, they are of little use..... In the research of this ancient philosophy one needs to adopt modern scientific theory. For example, using the science of the body, the science of movement, psychology, the science of nature to explain what appears to be shrouded in mystery. Using the study of fulcrums and spiral movement, for example, the saying “using four ounces to deflect a thousand pounds”. In this way, one can get away from the fanciful supernatural interpretations. Get rid of the distractions and go for the main point.”