



Berkshire Tai Chi



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Myths about Tai Chi

*It was six men of Hindustan, to learning much inclined,
Who went to see the elephant (though all of them were blind),
That each by observation, might satisfy his mind.*

*The first approached the elephant, and, happening to fall,
Against his broad and sturdy side, at once began to bawl:
'God bless me! But the elephant, is nothing but a wall!'*

*The second feeling of the tusk, cried: 'Ho! What have we here?
So very round and smooth and sharp! To me tis mighty clear,
This wonder of an elephant, is very like a spear!'*

*The third approached the animal, and, happening to take,
The squirming trunk within his hands, 'I see,' quoth he,
The elephant is very like a snake!'*

*The fourth reached out his eager hand, and felt about the knee:
'What most this wondrous beast is like, is mighty plain,' quoth he;
'Tis clear enough the elephant is very like a tree.'*

*The fifth, who chanced to touch the ear, Said; 'E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most; Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an elephant, is very like a fan!'*

*The sixth no sooner had begun, about the beast to grope,
Then, seizing on the swinging tail, that fell within his scope,
'I see,' quoth he, 'the elephant is very like a rope!'*

*And so these men of Hindustan, disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion, exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!*

And prate about the elephant not one of them has seen!

John Godfrey Saxe

This could so easily have been written with *Tai Chi* in mind.



To quote Mark Chen¹, “As with many, seemingly mystical, Eastern practices, Taiji has frequently [been hi-jacked] by well-meaning but mis-informed people hoping for a New Age panacea.[.....] The kids, they apparently reason, can beat up each other in a Karate class while the old folks do Taiji as a geriatric alternative to step aerobics. For an added bonus, practitioners will achieve harmony with the universe, improve their interpersonal skills, and cure their gout. Taiji does, indeed, have therapeutic properties, though sadly most people will never realise them by practising what they learn at the local New Age outlet.”

Myths about Tai Chi abound. Let us look at some of the more common ones.

Myth 1

(a) Tai Chi is very slow.

(b) Therefore, Tai Chi is not aerobic exercise.

Tai Chi is a Taoist art, and therefore any genuine Tai Chi system (and Chen style is a marvellous example) includes a mixture of both fast and slow movements, each harmonising with the other and making use of the body’s natural elasticity to generate speed, responsiveness, and power. Indeed, Baek Seungchul in his book *Chen family Tai Chi Chuan: 25 Key Disciplines* states: “*Classic Chen family Tai Chi Chuan requires the balance and change of energy between hard and soft, fast and slow. The essence of Tai Chi Chuan cannot be captured if a practitioner only studies softness and slowness.*”

It’s therefore just as true to say that Tai Chi is very fast and very hard. The Chen style Second Form (*Erlu*), for example, comprises 43 moves which will typically be completed in around two or three minutes. These include jumps, very low leg sweeps, dynamic punching sequences, stomps, and kicks. Traditionally, *Erlu* was practised after the first form, when the body was fully warmed up and the practice session was about to finish. After a full-speed run-through, the practitioner would be exhausted. There is most certainly an oxygen debt, and the heart pounds. The same is true of the various weapons forms, especially the *Dao*, or Sabre, form.

So, why do the uninitiated see Tai Chi as exclusively “slow”? This is mostly down to the way Tai Chi is presented in the media. Invariably, it is shown to be a gentle exercise routine for the elderly or for recuperating patients. At the time of writing, the BBC has just publicised a report on the benefits of Tai Chi practice for fibromyalgia patients aged 52 and older. It claims the British Medical Journal (which reviewed the study) “[suggests] ‘it may be time to rethink what type of exercise is most effective for patients’ “, since “*Tai chi mind-body treatment results in similar or greater improvement in symptoms than aerobic exercise, the current most commonly prescribed non-drug treatment*”. The inference is clear; Tai Chi is not strenuous exercise and is not aerobic in nature. How can this view have gained such widespread currency in the media, itself?

Since the media is used by various bodies to publicise their activities and preoccupations, it is, perhaps, unsurprising that there is a bias towards gentle (low-impact), therapeutic use of form practice because this is the aspect of Tai Chi which is best suited to address the issues of concern to such organisations.

¹ *Old Frame Chen Family Tai Chi Chuan*, North Atlantic Books (2004).

Most people only see a basic First Form being performed. Typically, this is a Yang style variant where the stances tend to be higher and there is no power release practised. Such forms are a training device whose aim is to develop balance and power. They do so by means of increased body awareness, improved posture, co-ordination, fluency of movement, and strength. In short, it is training body mechanics. To a degree, these can be trained at any speed, but deep co-ordination, fluidity, strength, and control can only be trained slowly – at least in the early stages. Beginners invariably lose connection and co-ordination when they try to move quickly. This makes them very vulnerable to a more skilful opponent who can manipulate them and unsettle them.

On the other hand, kinetic movement (i.e. that which depends on momentum) must be trained at speed. That, for example, is why the general tempo of sword forms is faster than that of many basic empty hand forms. The weight and balance of the weapon dictate the speed of movement by the momentum it creates. To try to slow down kinetic movements is to interfere with the natural flow of energy, creating resistance, which manifests itself in stiffness, jerkiness, and unnatural movement. All of these, of course, violate the principles of Tai Chi movement. Most laypeople, of course, are unaware that there are any weapons forms in Tai Chi Chuan.

So, for example, whilst non-kinetic moves can be trained and performed effectively at slow speed, kinetic ones cannot. Thus, there are slow moves in fast forms, and fast moves in slow forms. There are no exceptions. If Tai Chi were only capable of being performed slowly, how could it protect against a rapid attack?

Myth 2

- (a) Tai Chi is soft and gentle.
- (b) It is not physically demanding and is suitable for anyone, regardless of fitness level.

According to the BBC's *Guide to Tai Chi*: "Nobody is too old or unfit to take up tai chi." This perpetuates the myth as it comes from a recognised, "authoritative" source.

It is the opposite of what is actually true. Indeed, there is a very good argument to be made for people to undertake some form of fitness training **before** coming along to a Tai Chi class.

Tai Chi Chuan is a physical training system designed to enable a practitioner to build self-defence skills, using the whole body in such a way as to generate maximum power for minimum effort. It requires balance, agility (jumping, squatting, sweeping) and, allied to this, strength and stamina. In particular core strength and leg strength. It calls for joint stability and mobility. Whilst all these elements can be further developed over time, to be able to complete the full syllabus, one needs to have a modicum of balance, postural stability, strength, flexibility, and stamina to begin with.

Myth 3

- (a) Tai Chi is soft and gentle.
- (b) It is “defensive” not “aggressive”.

Whilst being soft and yielding, are certainly important characteristics of Tai Chi, there is more to Tai Chi than this. How can anyone defend themselves from a determined, violent attack if they are completely defensive in their attitude and actions? They cannot. This is nonsense.

Consistent with common sense, a Tai Chi practitioner when attacked avoids meeting force with force. Tai Chi requires us to re-direct force and use an opponent’s energy against him. This is not unique to Tai Chi: judo, jujitsu, aikido, and Shaolin kungfu all do this. Tai Chi employs both softness and hardness as a situation demands. In keeping with Taoist philosophy, hardness is neutralised by softness and yielding, but as soon as a weakness in the opponent is felt, this is exploited and hardness (in the form of explosive power release) is used to drive home the advantage.

However, we need also to be clear what is meant by “hardness”. In Tai Chi we refer to “essential hardness”. This describes the feeling of solidity which comes from being relaxed and connected, as opposed to that of rigidity which is produced by physical tension resulting from mental anxiety and incorrect use of body mechanics. It takes years of training to develop. Most people who start Tai Chi never stick at it long enough to experience this.

Taoism is all about natural balance and harmony. In Tai Chi we defend and attack in the same movement. A martial art is not “aggressive”; only the mind-set of the person concerned can be described in that way. A martial artist uses controlled aggression. Uncontrolled aggression is the mark of a thug.

Myth 4

Tai Chi practice is a programme for physical and mental health which aims to develop inner harmony.

No-one who knows anything about Tai Chi would dispute that it offers a great many therapeutic qualities. Indeed, in the Berkshire Tai Chi Newsletter, we periodically feature medical research which provides data to support claims about the benefits to be derived from regular Tai Chi practice. These refer to physical, mental and emotional well-being.

However, Tai Chi is not “a therapy” any more than gardening is; or playing the piano, or sculpting, or woodworking, or going for long walks in the country with your favourite dog. If you do anything which totally absorbs your attention and energies, you will find out something about yourself.

Nor is it unreservedly good for improving balance and general fitness; reasons why many doctors send people along to classes. Tai Chi Chuan is a martial art which traditionally has been taught either to young, fit, aspiring fighters; or to experienced martial artists from other

disciplines who already have a high level of physical capability. Tai Chi will certainly help to improve posture, leg strength and flexibility. As we saw earlier on in this article, the aim of form training, after all, is to develop balance and power. But, this is within the context of martial training and is predicated on a good basic level of fitness. Tai Chi cannot overcome conditions or physical disabilities which impair one's ability to train appropriately in order to develop a particular capability. Indeed, as argued previously, rather than Tai Chi training getting us fit, we ought instead to be looking at getting fit in order to take part in Tai Chi training.

Quite simply, Tai Chi is, and was designed to be, a fighting art. Therapeutic benefits are to be welcomed - where they arise - as a positive side-effect. Grandmaster Chen, for example, has experience of helping to moderate psychotic behaviour using elements taken from Tai Chi training - but these are supplemented by a wider application of Taoist principles coming from his deep understanding of the underpinning philosophy. Few people achieve such a high-level fusion of both physical and spiritual accomplishment.

Myth 5

Tai Chi is a spiritual practice which develops almost mystical capabilities in adepts.

Tai Chi is science.

It deals with body mechanics; physics, levers and angles. As Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang explains, if we do not understand the principles and we have no framework within which to understand them, then everything appears mystical and mysterious. Once we understand things and the knowledge is structured, then this becomes science.