

If you are over 50 or have been advised by a healthcare professional to consider taking a Tai Chi class, you might like to read this before committing yourself.

*We believe Tai Chi offers people of all ages a great many benefits and we are delighted to have many students who have decided to take up Tai Chi in later life. We would encourage people who really want to learn Tai Chi to do so and not worry about being too old, **BUT** we think it is only fair to dispel a few commonly held misconceptions first so that they can make an informed decision. In over 20 years of teaching Tai Chi, we have found that many people come along to classes with, at best, a vague idea of what Tai Chi is and what it can do for them. Some have been advised by healthcare professionals to learn Tai Chi because it can help with specific conditions. So, we thought it might help to outline briefly some key points you might not be aware of which could have a bearing on your decision, or at least your expectation when you get to class.*

Tai Chi is a Martial Art, not a Therapy.

Tai Chi was developed some 350 years ago as a martial art. It trains self-defence capabilities. In doing so, it helps to develop various qualities and characteristics which have benefit for emotional and physical well-being. Because of this, it has attracted considerable attention in recent years and has gained a reputation for improving a range of conditions; mostly notably, perhaps, poor balance and high blood pressure. (You may have seen others mentioned in the press.) This is hardly surprising, since to be a competent martial artist one needs a certain level of physical and mental toughness. Tai Chi, however, is not “a therapy” in the sense that alternative therapies such as Reiki and Shiatzu are. Moreover, Tai Chi does not offer “cures”. For example, whilst it can improve balance for healthy, fit individuals, it may well have no effect on individuals suffering from specific medical conditions which impair balance.

Tai Chi Training is strenuous.

There is a widespread perception that Tai Chi is “gentle” exercise. This is not true. It is true that it is usually practised as *low impact* exercise in the early stages. Whilst more experienced students can practise some very energetic, aerobic forms, Tai Chi for a Beginner is not energetic in the way that Zumba or Body Pump are. This has to be treated with caution, though. Tai Chi is a form of martial training and in its basic form calls for suppleness, and strength, especially leg strength and core strength. Traditional training uses the whole body and engages all the major muscle groups. If you have not exercised much for a lengthy period of time, even though the movements themselves are gentle, you will feel it!

Tai Chi is not Music & Movement. Actions must be executed very precisely.

Many new Beginners in the Over 50s age group perceive Tai Chi as a gentle form of exercise for relaxation. It is actually a training regime whose aim is to develop sensitivity, balance, and power for self-defence. Tai Chi is science and draws on a very clearly defined set of movement principles. The body mechanics call for precision in all postures and transitions in order to ensure their effectiveness in combat. All actions must be executed very precisely. It is not a form of self-expression where one can pretty much interpret the movements as one sees fit: the principles are not arbitrary conventions. They are absolute functional requirements. Small corrections make a big difference. Be prepared to be corrected. Frequently.

How we teach Tai Chi at Berkshire Tai Chi.

In Berkshire Tai Chi classes, we teach very traditionally. We want everyone to enjoy themselves and feel that they are making progress but we do not compromise on the basics of the art. Following on from the previous point, we do not accept the attitude that “near enough is good enough”. We believe we owe it to our Master, our students and ourselves to work to the highest standards. Some people just want to come along, wave their arms around a bit and not be corrected as this seems too “serious”. We take the view that if something is worth doing, it is worth doing to the best of one’s ability. We do not settle for second best.

You need to practise.

Practice makes perfect. Moreover, any health benefits are incremental and will take time to materialise. To get real benefit from attending classes you need to try to incorporate Tai Chi into your daily life. In the very beginning, this may be as simple as doing a few of the warm-ups you can remember every day. Later on, when learning the Form, we have to memorise a set sequence of moves. This is only possible through continuous repetition. As one gets further into the Form, obviously the sequence gets longer and there is more to remember. Without doing some practice between classes, a new student will never be able to memorise the sequence. They will never progress.

Please remember:

It will reward your efforts many times over if you persevere and give you a lot of pleasure, but whatever anyone else may have told you...

Tai Chi is not an easy option.