



The Essex Tai Chi Academy Newsletter Two, April 2017

The symbol central to our logo is 'T'ai', with the same sound but different meaning to the 'T'ai' in 'T'ai Chi'. It is a hexagram from the 5,000-year-old Daoist classic, the *I Ching*.

A hexagram consists of two trigrams, each made up of three lines – solid, broken, or both. The broken lines represent Yin energy, and the solid lines, Yang energy. The upper trigram represents Earth (pure Yin), and the lower, Heaven (pure Yang).

Yin and Yang have motions associated with them. The light, heavenly Yang energy tends to rise, while the heavy, earthly Yin energy tends to sink. As the two energies meet and commune with one another peace and harmony are achieved and great accomplishments become possible.

And so this symbol represents peace, harmony and goodwill.

**The Essex Tai Chi Academy runs classes in Tai Chi, Sabre, Lok Hup Ba Fa and Sword at
Birchanger, Black Notley, Burnham-on-Crouch, Cold Norton, Felsted, Maldon and Mundon**

Origins of Tai Chi Chuan

David Woollcott

This means 'Grand Ultimate Fist' and is one of the oldest martial arts in the world. Although little is known about its early history, a monk named Chang San Feng (or Zhangfeng) is credited as the founder in China more than 700 years ago. He lived in the time of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and gained a reputation amongst the emperors, who searched for him unsuccessfully while they were rebuilding their armies.

From that time to the present, he has become a mythical hero, an archetypal Daoist immortal, a monk-warrior-martial artist gifted with extraordinary magical powers. As a Daoist he would have knowledge about the use of the 'Three Treasures' of *Jing* (the body's physical essence), *Qi* (life-energy/breath) and *Shen* (silent mental focus), the foundational concepts of Tai Chi Chuan.

There are many stories as to how Chang San Feng discovered Tai Chi Chuan, including observation of the animal kingdom from which he developed a large range of motions and responses. One involved watching a snake and a crane in deadly combat. As the snake prepared for attack, it would raise its head, bow its body, and appear to gather its intrinsic energy, ready to strike out like an arrow. In response, the crane would deflect the attack effortlessly with a downward arc of its powerful wing and then retaliate by stabbing its beak down at its prey.

The snake used its flexibility to sway or dodge the strike and then lash out at the crane's legs. The crane, however, simply raised the vulnerable limb in a relaxed fashion so that the snake's bite could not attach itself, thanks to the 'emptiness' of the bird's extremity. This natural display of yin and yang from the animal kingdom made a great impression on Chang San Feng providing him with the realization that yielding is more effective than using brute force. He still incorporated many of the martial postures he had learned from the Shaolin Monastery, but tempered them with his own variations and innovations.

In contrast to aggressive, 'external' hard styles of martial arts that concentrate on improving muscle strength and cardiovascular fitness, Tai Chi Chuan is a defensive, 'internal' soft style that focuses on the manipulation of chi.

Whatever the truth about Chang San Feng, he was a highly respected Daoist master of internal energy arts. He attracted many Daoist followers who continued his mind-body practices, studied writings attributed to him, and told and retold stories (many apocryphal) about Chang San Feng over the centuries.

Many lives, in many days. News from you and your classes

Glenys Barton

I am an artist. The art world is often a competitive place and can be a bit cut-throat. My work, when I achieve success, is very rewarding, but I also spend many hours alone in my studio working. It can be a lonely business.

Since I discovered Tai Chi I spend two evenings a week exercising my brain and body in a completely different way, with a variety of lovely people from worlds other than my own, who I would probably normally never meet. It is wonderfully rewarding.

Early in my career I was Laban dance trained and very briefly taught it in schools. The dance-like quality of Tai Chi and Lok Hup Ba Fa satisfies my need to move my body in space and thrills me when I briefly feel I get it right!

Sue Mckay

My input regarding the Felsted class is the fun and games we have had regarding the heating (a problem with the boiler) in the hall. The first week, the fan heater provided by the hall committee was immediately purloined by the mother and toddler group. The following week, there was still no heat but a promise that all would be well as a part for the boiler was on order. In week three the class turned up wrapped in winter woollies – to find the heating on full blast! We had to open windows. In week four we danced around ladders as the hall was being painted. Some members really *did* part wild horses...

Kim Clayton

I am a fairly new student to Tai Chi and very pleased to share my experience.

Unfortunately, I suffered an unexpected sudden bout of ill health two years ago and underwent a major neurosurgical procedure. As a result I suffered from balance and co-ordination problems and weakness of my left side. I had several months of physiotherapy and gradually started to improve, but I did wonder if anything else might further help my recovery.

Internet research suggested Tai Chi was beneficial for balance, strengthening muscles and co-ordination so I decided to give it a try. My physiotherapist was delighted and felt it was the best thing I could do. I contacted the Academy, outlining my issues and concerns. My local and current instructor made contact, offering support and reassurance. I am so glad I conquered my nerves and attended my first class. I was made to feel very welcome and safe. I am now able to complete a set, even tackling Repulse Monkey – a real achievement for me to be able to step backwards. While I struggle with equal and opposite arm movements, these movements nonetheless really help with my co-ordination and challenge my brain to learn new things – exactly what I need.

I have had so many positive comments from friends and family regarding improvement to my mobility since starting Tai Chi, which is really positive. I have seen a real improvement in my physical health and psychological well-being, and thank my instructor and fellow students for their support and patience.

David Woollcott – Benton Hall Golf and Country Club

In December 2014 Mary Dann and I were invited to the club by the Events Co-ordinator following the resignation of their Tai Chi instructor, who had taught a short form of 40 moves. We demonstrated our 108-move set, Lok Hup Ba Fa, Sabre and Sword, and I started a new class in January 2015 with the challenge of 'undoing' the previous form. The Continuing class currently has 13 regular students, and a similar number commenced a Beginners' class in September last year. The Benton Hall attendees are not members of ETCA and do not therefore enjoy the same benefits.

Remember

- If you don't 'get' something in class, or in this Newsletter, do ask! It may be a question raised or point put across to which someone else would like the answer
- This is *your* Newsletter – feel free to give your instructor a contribution
- Subscription fees are due on 1 April
- World Tai Chi Day – Saturday 29 April
- Upcoming workshops
 - 29/30 April – Tai Chi in Palma, Mallorca
 - 20/21 May – Tai Chi in Shropshire
 - 21 May – Lok Hup Ba Fa in St Ives
 - 2 July – Tai Chi in St IvesYou'll have had emails about these ... Lift shares are obviously available, so have a word with your instructor or chat among yourselves
- Possible day excursions with Lodge Coaches:
 - Sunday 20 May – Houses of Parliament & Apsley House
 - Sunday 30 July – Bure Valley Railway & Mississippi Boat Cruise
 - Sunday 6 August – Sandringham House & Gardens
 - Saturday 19 August – Shakespeare – a Day with the Bard
 - Saturday 26 August – Adam's Cotswold Farm Park (highly recommended!)Pick-ups are at Witham/Wickham Bishops/Heybridge/Maldon, with some early starts
If you're interested, please go to www.lodgecoaches for details, and email Jacqueline – jtwyman@talktalk.net

Thought for the quarter

You've found Tai Chi – something you love doing – accept the challenge of getting better ...

Celebrate what you enjoy!

Ukraine

Mary Dann

One of the pleasures of practising Tai Chi is meeting other practitioners from around the world, and having the opportunity of visiting them in their own countries. One such occasion was my trip to Ukraine in 2008.

Late the previous year, Mike (Baker-Rogers) and I attended an International Tai Chi Workshop in Colchester, where we met Svetlana, a young woman from Ukraine. Her making it to the workshop at all was quite an achievement: visas are difficult to obtain, and the journey expensive. Other members of her group, who were very isolated and had few visitors, had raised funds for her trip. Mike and I decided then and there that we would visit. Svetlana invited us to stay with her and her mother, Ludmilla, in their flat in Lviv.

We set off on the first leg of our near three-week adventure in early May, flying to Krakow. We then made our way to the Grand Central Station, a magnificent building from an earlier era, which instantly made me feel as though I had stepped on to the set of a 1960s cold war movie. (Unfortunately I didn't spot Michael Caine!) We travelled by train to the Polish/Ukraine border town of Medyka, and then on to Lviv, our destination in Ukraine.

Polish trains run to time – slowly. The total journey was just over 200 miles, but was scheduled to take nine hours! We lumbered off into the Polish countryside, and I don't think we ever got above 30mph. Eventually we reached the border, where everyone had to alight for passport and customs control, which was a remarkably quick and painless procedure – far easier than attempting to enter the USA (even then!). While we were being checked, each carriage had to be lifted and have its bogies changed in readiness for the wider gauge track used in Ukraine. Back on board, but before we could leave, the wheeltappers had to come alongside and do *their* job. (Who remembers the Wheeltappers and Shunters Club? Now I know their function!)

Svetlana was waiting for us at the station, with a friend and a car – the only time we travelled by car – normally it was Shanks's pony, or, extravagantly, a trolley bus.

Entering the flat was like stepping back in time – to somewhere your grandmother might have lived, complete with an ancient gas water heater that had to be lit with a taper, and threatened to blow us up. But we were comfortable and made very welcome.

Ludmilla spoke very good English and was most interesting to talk to. One of her earliest memories was being evacuated during the war. There was no time to gather more than what they stood up in, and they were bundled on to trains and travelled hundreds of miles into Russia and safety. She said she would never forget the kindness of the locals wherever they stopped, they poured on to the train with food and in particular milk for the children. She had tears in her eyes when retelling this.

Naturally Svetlana and Ludmilla wanted us to try their local dishes. Borscht was quite pleasant, but the strange fish from the Carpathian Mountains, considered a delicacy, was a struggle. There was a chicken dish that was obviously complicated and lengthy to prepare and was made especially for us. I did my best to smile and chew away.

The Tai Chi group was small but enthusiastic. We attended a class in an old gymnasium that had seen better days. There was no heating, and in the winter members had been known to do the set in fur coats, hats, boots and gloves. (In contrast, one sunny day we met for Tai Chi in the park, which was delightful.) The floor was in need of repair, which made Wave Hands like Clouds a new experience as we dodged the holes. At one class, they asked me to take the lead corner, which I accepted, and proceeded at my usual pace, which turned out to be somewhat slower than theirs. At first they politely followed my lead, but after a while began to get a bit agitated and tried to speed up. Finally the penny dropped – they had to be out of the hall on the dot of half past, and the next group would come in immediately. We were going to run over and the waiting group outside the door was getting restless.

The members were all keen to show us their city, and took turns to take us out and about. We saw quite a lot of Lviv's many churches – several times! My favourites were an Armenian one, and a beautiful wooden one in a preserved village, complete with school and cottages. We also visited the site of an old castle that gave us a wonderful view of the city, and visited the local Language School. The students, who all spoke excellent English, were apparently thrilled to meet some real English people, and were full of questions. The highlight of our stay, though, was a visit to Lviv's magnificent opera house to see Verdi's *Il Trovatore*.

All too soon it was time to leave, and get the train to Lodz (pronounced 'wuj', the name apparently means 'boat'), the third largest city in Poland, to attend an International Workshop celebrating the grand opening of the Tai Chi Centre there. Ludmilla packed up enough provisions for our journey, in fact for an army, and we set off on the 10-hour trip.

Lodz once had a very large Jewish population, and after the German occupation in 1939, they were forced into a walled area known as the Ghetto, from where many were then shipped off to concentration camps. This area is now in effect a museum. We stayed in an old Jewish school which, while basic, with wooden bunks, was comfortable – and the restaurant was a gem. One evening a couple entertained us with piano and violin.

The opening of the Tai Chi centre was followed by a two-day workshop. On the day of the opening we all – over 300 practitioners – assembled in a large square, formerly part of a factory site but now a shopping centre, to do a set together, which was a wonderful experience.

Performing the set/The opening moves

Judy Lee-Fenton and David Woollcott

There are some styles of Tai Chi that are practised in a combative way, and many of our moves have martial arts applications. In this section we describe some of the moves and their relationship to martial arts, in defence and offence, as well as how they affect different organs of the body and their more esoteric interpretations

The Bow

In Tai Chi and other forms of martial arts, the practice of bowing is similar to shaking hands or showing a sign of respect, without any religious symbolism. Depending on the style, the bow can be directed to the hall in which the class is held (often referred to as the *dojo*) on entry, the instructor, or your opponent in combat. In Tai Chi, we bow as a general sign of respect to our art and founder, our instructor, and our fellow practitioners.

To perform the bow, raise the arms and, for women hold the left thumb between the thumb and fingers of the right hand. Men hold the right thumb. Keep the legs more or less straight and bend forward from the hips.

There are many variations of the bow – select whichever seems right for you if you are offered alternatives in different classes.

Commencement and Left Grasp Bird's Tail

Commencement is Wu Chi, equivalent to nothingness, emptiness, so relax in the stance and empty/still your mind. When we start the Tai Chi set we start with an empty space and with the energies, Yin and Yang, constantly using contraction and expansion (equal and opposite throughout the set), and we end with the opening stance

Hence the emphasis on an upright, 'natural' but relaxed stance. Although the feet are flat on the floor the focus and feeling of the weight should be slightly forward, into the area referred to as the 'bubbling spring' (*hseub* in Chinese) – just behind the ball of the foot. The legs are straight, with the knees slightly bent and the arms hanging loose to the side, although, with the weight of the body on the bubbling spring, they will be slightly forward.

In Chinese cosmology the Universe begins with Wu Chi, an empty space symbolized by a large ring. Within this ring many energies begin to expand and fight against each other until only two remain – the complementary but opposing forces of Yin and Yang. One cannot exist without the other. In the Yin and Yang symbol each half has a dot of the other half, so each has a fraction of the other. This helps to create balance in the universe – as above, so below. These energies help us to create balance within ourselves and, with the help of Tai Chi, better health, balance and peace of mind.

The two opening moves of the set are primarily to start the process of strengthening the muscles of the back and abdomen and to increase lung capacity.

As regards the arms and hands, wrists should not be limp throughout the set. This not only improves the form of Tai Chi but the effort involved strengthens the ligaments, coordinates muscles, exercises tendons, etc. The curvature of the arms in front of the body, in the first tor-yu movement, uses the fleshy part of the arms to protect the upper and middle sections of the torso from a blow. The lower hand, which pushes down adjacent to the knee, is used to deflect punches and kicks delivered to the lower part of the body.

Grasp Bird's Tail

Grasp Bird's Tail is a set of movements that aids our large intestine and thus helps to avoid constipation. The literal translation from the Chinese is 'Hand examines carefully small bird's body hair', meaning we should look closely at the smallest detail – your hands. Every little movement is important in Tai Chi. The movements are also a reminder of awareness, being totally present in your move – not the one just past or the one to come.

As we know, Tai Chi consists of slow, connecting movements that aid relaxation, reduce tension, slow the breathing and clear the mind – which is why we sometimes forget the next move...

The two-handed block (palm to palm, done twice) is a stronger block than in Left Grasp Bird's Tail, and the two-handed 'push' is a strong defence to guard against your opponent, who may move from the front to one side.