



The Essex Tai Chi Academy Newsletter One, January 2017

Happy New Year,
and a very Happy Chinese New Year*
to everyone

Your instructors thought it might be a good idea to produce a quarterly Newsletter to give you some of the information that it's not always possible to include in class. We hope you enjoy reading it and perhaps even printing the odd copy to leave somewhere strategic so that we can continue to increase the number of students who enjoy and benefit from tai chi

Contributions welcome

Please let us know what you think

**The Essex Tai Chi Academy runs classes in tai chi, sabre, lok hup and sword at
Birchanger, Black Notley, Burnham-on-Crouch, Cold Norton, Felsted, Maldon and Mundon**

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Chinese New Year

This year Chinese New Year falls on Saturday, 28 January. It is a moveable date, occurring between 21 January and 20 February – so check very carefully (www.chinahighlights.com) for your own sign of the zodiac.

2017 celebrates the Year of the Golden Cockerel – unfortunately, 2017 is not considered a good year for golden cockerels. On the upside, golden cockerels are considered to be hardworking, resourceful, courageous and talented...

Our heartfelt thanks to Judy for yet again sourcing our fantastic t-shirts.

Chinese New Year, or Spring Festival, is the most important traditional celebration in China and may last for up to 16 days. Many customs surround decorations, food, greetings and gifts. Houses are decorated with, among other items, red couplets, which are paired phrases, typically of seven Chinese characters each, written on red paper in black ink (red is considered a lucky colour). The couplets are pasted on each side of a door frame, and sometimes a phrase of four or five characters is fixed to the top of the door frame. Some Chinese people write the couplets themselves, but most people buy them at a market. Pasting the couplets is thought to keep evil away.

Chinese New Year was originally set to coincide with the slack time before the beginning of a new farming year. Now, though 55% of the Chinese population is urban, the New Year's Feast, or Reunion Dinner, is a 'must' for as many family members as can gather together. Most people try very hard to make this a family event – hence the crowds at railway and bus stations as families try to get 'home' for the feast. Parents give their children red envelopes – which always contain money – after the dinner, with good wishes for them to grow healthily in the coming year. The money is believed to bring good luck.

Our good luck at the Essex Tai Chi Academy is to enjoy a very splendid Christmas meal at a much reduced price.

And so, what started off this note about Chinese New Year? The bells, the bells! In ancient times monks struck temple bells at midnight to remind people a new day was coming. On Chinese New Year the temple bells are still struck at midnight all over the country – Hanshan in Suzhou, and the Temple of Heaven in Beijing. They are struck 108 times ... now *there's* a thought.

A Life in the Day ...

Hello, my name is Linda Hotston and I am a relative novice at tai chi, starting lessons when I retired, about five years ago.

My working career started when I was 16, working in the City of London for one of the well-known high street banks. I loved the hustle and bustle, and only left to start a family. When the children were small I worked part time, cleaning a local church and the church hall, and as a dental receptionist. When the children were old enough I started to work full time for the local Magistrates Courts in Harlow and Chelmsford. Initially I was a court usher, and then worked in the fines department. I thoroughly enjoyed my years in the courts: the work was varied – from taking fines, clinics, to balancing the daily accounts. I certainly saw a different side of life working there!

I have been married for 48 years and have two children, who live close to each other in Australia. They have two children each – one having two boys and the other two girls. We are very fortunate that we are able to visit once a year. If we manage it right the total journey takes about 24 hours. Missing the family doesn't get any easier, though. We cope by keeping in daily touch via FaceTime – not as good as having hugs all round, but modern technology is truly wonderful.

I really enjoy my tai chi classes – the people are welcoming and friendly, and the instructors so patient. I certainly feel more flexible and my balance has improved. The wonderful thing about tai chi is that you never stop learning and improving your technique, not to mention the chi tingling in your fingers and hands at the end of a set. I have recently started to learn lok hup, which is proving quite a challenge. My excuse is that after a tai chi class my brain is tired, but I am thoroughly enjoying the experience.

I would recommend that everyone learns tai chi!

Tai Chi for Health

Jacqueline Twyman

The Sunday Telegraph recently reported that crosswords, puzzles and sudokos are simply not enough to keep the brain stimulated. While brain-training games do no harm, their youth-preserving qualities are something of a red herring, because they are repetitive and our brains get quite used to them and therefore become good at them. What we need to do is challenge the brain to learn something *new* and out of our comfort zone (such as tai chi of course), which is much more challenging. Think of your brain as a muscle and, in the same way that if you do the same exercise every day you'll stop seeing results, this happens to your brain.

The challenge of tai chi is the multi-layering of development. We start by having our weight on the wrong foot, waving our arms around, thinking and saying, 'I'll never get this'. But somehow we keep coming back. And each class has something new to offer – a different way of 'sitting/relaxing', an understanding of better balance, 'waist moves the arms', etc. Many students ask how long it takes to be 'good' at tai chi. At first I was reluctant to reply, not wanting to be discouraging; but my own experience is that it took me 3½ years to be 'comfortable' doing the set. And I haven't stopped learning since.

A student who has been coming to class for a year asked recently when she'd become a 'continuing' student. About now, was my reply, and we'll all be staying at this level for several years...

Students all over the world ask about the healing benefits of each tai chi posture. When we have a terrible cold, bad back, or a mysterious attack of some ailment, it's very easy to say, 'Tai chi for health, eh?' But as one of the Cold Norton students often says, 'Where would we be without it?'

Tai chi helps the body to rejuvenate itself naturally.

The exercise makes the muscles and tendons of the body stretch and relax alternately. As a result, they become more flexible and the joints become looser. Blood flow is improved partly because of the looser joints but mainly as a direct result of the stretching and relaxing exercises. Better blood circulation helps the lymphatic, nervous and digestive systems to run more efficiently.

The form of tai chi movements and the gentle manner in which they are made stretch the muscles, tendons and ligaments in a natural way, creating a feeling of relaxation. Unlike other exercises involving stretching, tai chi engages the whole body. The more you connect the whole body the more relaxation is achieved and the more effective the exercise is.

The more you practise, the better you'll feel!

Simply by attending class you will begin to feel better in yourself, and your sleep will be deeper and more restful.

So attend regularly – more than one class if you can – especially if you are feeling tired, run-down and not in the mood. Because you'll leave feeling much better and more energetic.

Practise at home for an additional hour or two, a couple of days a week, and you will notice many further improvements, including

- a sharper mind,
- more energy,
- improved appetite,
- more flexible joints.

In short, you'll feel younger!

And you can still do tai chi if you are not in the best of health. In fact, an additional commitment to practise every day for an hour can work wonders for your recovery.

Pain can reduce, medication can work better and you will feel lighter ... and happier!

In the next Newsletter we'll look at some of the moves and see how they affect the organs of the body. (Again, thanks to Judy, this time for sourcing the information.) Tai chi heals the body by improving the flow of vital energy (chi) through the acupuncture meridians, eliminating the imbalances or unblocking the blockages.

In alternate quarters, we'll be looking at the martial arts implications of the moves (thanks to David Woollcott).

A look back at 2016 ...

And what an eventful year!

Of the two Maldon classes that started in January, the Friday morning class at the United Reform Church (CM9 4PZ) is still going strong. If you haven't already done so, why not give it a visit?

Our first workshop of the year was on Saturday, 23 January, followed by the Academy's AGM. This year's workshop and AGM will be on Saturday 28 January (Chinese New Year's Day) but, as you will already know, will follow a different, slightly more exciting format.

Members of Mundon and Cold Norton classes enjoyed an informal lunch at Izumi's in Maldon to celebrate Chinese New Year in February.

And, talking of food – following the Great Leighs' class move to Felsted, members from Birchanger have been making the journey to attend. This had a knock-on effect, with local venues being unable to cope with the numbers for a celebratory meal. So Felsted's 2016 Christmas meal was held in the Memorial Hall (CM6 3DY) with outside caterers. Members provided all the desserts – how versatile is that!

To mark World Tai Chi Day on Saturday, 30 April members of the Academy met for tai chi in the park. The first set commenced at 10.00am to coincide with tai chi practitioners worldwide. This was followed by tea and cake in the grounds of the Chelmsford Society of Model Engineers (www.chelmsfordsocietyofmechanicalengineers.org.uk), when Mary was presented with a voucher subscribed to by members in recognition of her dedication to and support of the Academy.

On Friday, 17 June members visited Michael Baker-Rogers' bench for its official unveiling. The bench is the Academy's lasting memorial to its co-founder and first chairman. The bench is on the towpath of the Chelmer & Blackwater Canal, behind Heybridge Cemetery gates.

Instructors have held regular discussion meetings and practical sessions throughout the year, and attended instructors' workshops organized by the Eastern Counties, and Shropshire Tai Chi Academies

Additionally, and internationally, Mary and David attended a workshop in Vancouver in April and instructors and members went to a weekend workshop in Malaga.

Vancouver Workshop 22–24 April

Mary Dann and David Woolcott had the opportunity to attend a tai chi workshop hosted by the Canadian Tai Chi Academy and led by Doug Overholt. On the first evening, they attended a class taken by Doug and another instructor, covering both a continuing class and one for beginners.

The main workshop was held in a hall at the Botanical Gardens with other instructors from all over Canada in attendance. Mary and David, together with four instructors from the Eastern Counties Tai Chi Academy, were given a special welcome after travelling the furthest, a flight of just over nine hours.

Over the two days, in addition to performing the 108-move tai chi set, there was significant focus on tai chi essentials. These included:

- the Three Treasures of Leung Tse Pang (Dun Yao {don-yu}, Tuo Yau {tor-yu} and Zhan Zhuang, the latter being the standing exercise/meditation);
- the five principles of Moy Lin Shin; and
- the four-part sequence in movement.

So important are these essentials to our form that, over the two days, every aspect was worked on in just the first 17 moves! Slightly different to a normal workshop in the UK, but perhaps you can now appreciate why your instructors spend so much time on these essentials in our continuing classes as we seek to develop our understanding of tai chi. You will hear more about these key aspects from this workshop and the one held in Malaga, where the message was consistent, at the AGM workshop, in future newsletters, and in your classes.

Other important messages for our health included that the body is a pump: the action of pumping activates the lymph glands, the arteries and, in time and with practice, the other internal organs in the body will move, aiding digestion and general health.

Other aspects of the workshop included floor and sitting exercises, and working on Yi Jin Jing (a series of exercises and movements designed for muscle and tendon changing). The latter are gradually being introduced in our classes. One of the instructors gave a very interesting talk and demonstration of the Sitting Set. Participation during this was very insightful and something we intend to follow through here.

The main benefit of such a workshop is meeting and working with other instructors who have many years' experience and worked with Mr Moy. It was also very interesting to watch instructors, in pairs or small groups, working together to examine their own understanding and development of tai chi. A significant message from the workshop is that, if examination of their own style and learning from others is so important to them after 20 or 30 years, then this must encourage us to do likewise.

Malaga workshop, 6–9 October

It was a very early start for Mary Dann, Lisa Kay, Lorrie Dixon and me, Judy Lee-Fenton, with the journey to Stansted well scripted (or so I thought). On our arrival at the airport we searched for our pre-booked car park. Every colour but Blue was mentioned. When we found it, it wouldn't let us in... Finally, panic over, we were inside the airport in the queue for boarding.

Malaga here we come!

We were met, with others from our group, by Peter Lambiris of the Canadian Tai Chi Academy. He had taken over organizing airport collections because they'd become somewhat chaotic. Even with him at the helm, what with discussing with the Spanish drivers who was to take who, it was a good hour before we all left the airport.

Unpacked and refreshed we headed for our first class, an evening session at the Malaga Academy club house.

It was only the next day that we heard that the group from Birchanger had discovered their hotel didn't exist! Fortunately disaster was averted by their being able to share a nice apartment.

The following morning we were at the Polideportivo Jose Paterna municipal pavilion, where the workshop was held over the next three days. Seeing familiar faces, meeting new people, and our Canadian tutors, was a real treat. The next few days were excellent – plenty of tai chi, good food and good company.

Doug Overholt showed us a more in-depth way of tai chi (as detailed in David and Mary's account of the Vancouver workshop), which knowledge we have brought back to pass on to our students and include in our practice. All in all, a very informative weekend.

And a look ahead to 2017 ...

Don't forget the AGM on Saturday 28 January.

The Academy has been invited to give a tai chi demonstration at Hylands House (CM2 8WQ) on Monday, 30 January. Originally branded as 'Positive ageing in Essex' the event seems to have morphed into 'Silver Sparklers and Rockets'. Further details will be available before the AGM.

On Sunday 5 February a Chinese New Year Gala takes place at the Mercury Theatre, Colchester. Filled with inspiring dance, art and culture, there will be a vibrant celebration of the year of the Golden Cockerel. The show features the traditional lion dance, martial arts, Chinese folk dance, singing from the community school choir – and more. Presented by the Colchester Chinese Culture Society, a non-profit-making organization, this is an amateur production, but worth a visit if you'd like to continue Chinese New Year celebrations.

World Tai Chi day is on Saturday 29 April. Do put this in your diary – details of our celebrations to follow.

Thought for this quarter

In every movement, every part of the body must be light, agile, and connected in a sequence. The postures continuous, the movement rooted in the feet, released through the legs, focused on the waist and expressed through the fingers.

Zhang Sanfeng (c. 1247–1447)

Thus he is believed to have lived through the Song, Yuan and Ming Dynasties