



## **The Essex Tai Chi Academy Newsletter Four, October 2017**

### **Tai Chi for Arthritis**

Tai chi can help with the symptoms of osteoarthritis at least as much as standard physical therapy and sometimes more, according to experts at the American College of Rheumatology. The gentle, slow movements are renowned for keeping the body flexible, strong and supple but, unlike many other forms of exercise, allow the joints to be moved with awareness so that one can stop if there is discomfort or pain. This careful use of movement encourages the use of joints without causing undue discomfort, or wear and tear, because the exercises are all low impact.

**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**

## **Attitudes, hints and cautions, Or, Practice makes perfect**

(Adapted from Neijia Tao, a weblog)

It is said that when Liang Tzu Peng was teaching Lok Hup to Mr Moy he had him do the first two moves over and over again – *for a year* – before teaching him the next moves. It wasn't uncommon for student Moy to repeat the same move six or seven hundred times a day. Perseverance and diligence are two of the traits we should cultivate if we are to have any hope of achieving anything of quality. We've all heard instructors say, 'Do this move with me', 'On your own, please', 'Again, please' or 'One more time'. Only by doing the moves over and over can we make the moves *ours*.

You'll benefit more from doing consecutive sets than doing an equal number of sets with a time gap in between. After the conclusion of the first set, stand for 3, 6 or 9 breaths before starting the set again. Bow at the start of the first and at the end of the last set.

Another useful training tool is 'Standing'. This means holding a position from any point in the set for as long as it feels comfortable – work at relaxing any tension. We usually Stand at the beginning or end of a move, but Standing in the middle of the move works well too. Feel free to play around with Standing where you feel you need most work.

We've all done rows of Parting wild horse's mane and Twist steps. Now take that concept outside – into your garden, or a park – and do 100m or more at one go. Try Twist steps forward, Repulse monkey back; or Cloud hands forward and Parting of wild horse's mane back. Work on different surfaces – and facing in different directions! Try not to fall into the trap of only doing your Tai Chi on the classroom surface (and direction) you're familiar with. Concrete, carpet, tile, vinyl, asphalt, grass and sand will all require you to make adjustments which in the long run will improve your set

Additionally, when practising, why not try a number of tor-yus followed by a number of don-yus, and repeat, followed by more of the same. Remember to do more tor-yus on your 'weaker' side.

When we attend class we conform to the set, but when we walk out of the door into the real world it is the set that must conform. There's nothing in our day-to-day lives to which we can't apply the principles of the set: how we move objects, how we lift, walk sit or stand, or anything else for that matter. Unfortunately there are no classes for these concepts so it's up to each of us to find through trial and effort what works best for our lives. An example would be if you're reaching down to a low cupboard – do you bend down or do you don-yu down? The goal is to make the principles from the set fit your life. Make your lifestyle some extra practice!

Wise words from Mr Moy Lin-Shin – 'If 20 years after we part you're still doing only what I showed you, then I failed to teach you anything worth knowing.'

## The Ten Essences of Tai Chi

In the last Newsletter we looked closely at the first three essences:

1. Lift the head to raise the spirit
2. Lower the shoulders to sink the elbows
3. Soften the chest and curve the back

Rather than continue with the next essences, Judy looks here at putting them into practice in the set, using Left grasp bird's tail and Grasp bird's tail, remembering at the same time the five basic principles:

1. 45-degree step
2. Knee over the ankle
3. Hips and shoulders square to the front
4. Straight line head to heel
5. Equal and opposite

The literal Chinese translation of Grasp bird's tail is 'look and attend to small things', so we should arrive at this move as if it is the first and only time in the set, not 'Here we go again, I know this one'. Pay attention to the small moves as well as the big ones!

So, adding contraction and expansion, to help move the lymph around the body, we are ready to attend to all three applications within this move. Starting from the last move of Parting wild horse's mane, stand up and hold the ball (Lift the head to raise the spirit), Relax (Lower your shoulders to sink the elbows and Soften the chest to curve the back). Sit to the right-hand corner (contraction) and, still facing the right corner, place the left foot to the left-hand corner (45-degree step), weight still on the right foot and the body still facing the right-hand corner. Tor-yu to the left-hand corner (make sure your knee is over your ankle and your hips and shoulders are square. Stand up on the left foot, hold the ball again, facing the left-hand corner (expansion). Sit to the left-hand corner and place the right foot straight down the room (45-degree step and contraction), tor-yu forward with your hands in the 'T' position. This is where you should attend to the hands as they change position and check that your shoulders are still lowered and your elbows down). Tor-yu back and let the waist move the arms. Tor-yu forward (straight line head to heel) as you change your hands to the tiger's mouth position. Again tor-yu back, letting the waist move the arms. Tor-yu forward to the last push, all the time following the five basic principles.

These three tor-yus are expansion and contraction moves with equal and opposite force. Also check that your chest is softened to help with your breathing.

It may seem a lot to look into at once but it reduces the speed and concentrates your mind on the small things within the moves, following the first three essences, the five basic principles, and attention to expansion and contraction.

As a reminder, here are the remaining essences we'll be looking at in more detail next time:

4. Loosen the waist
5. Be aware of weight distribution
6. Co-ordinate the top and bottom halves of the body
7. Continuity in movement
8. Unite body and mind
9. Use mind, not force
10. Seek stillness within motion and motion within stillness

**Fail fast and often. Learn. And improve.**

Drew Houston, an entrepreneur (quoted in Matthew Syed, *Black Box Thinking*) has learned an important psychological lesson. To leverage the power of failure, you have to be resilient and open. In other words you have to have the right mindset as well as the right system. If you run away from mistakes, you won't get anywhere. He says: 'It is a very gruelling experience. One day you are on top of the world ... the next day there is a huge bug ... and you're tearing your hair out.'

Or take Sir David Brailsford, head of Team Sky cycling, on 'marginal gains': 'The whole approach comes from the idea that if you break down a big goal [learning the Tai Chi set] into small parts, and then improve on each of them, you will gain a huge increase when you put them all together...Having a grand strategy is futile on its own. You also have to look at the smaller level, figure out what is working and what isn't. Each step may be small, but the aggregation can be huge...

If you break a performance into its component parts, you can build back up with confidence. Clear feedback is the cornerstone of improvement. Marginal gains, as an approach, is about having the intellectual honesty to see where you are going wrong and delivering improvements as a result.'

Is it better to focus on bold leaps that lead to new conceptual terrain, or on the marginal gains that help to optimize one's existing fundamental assumptions? Is it about testing small assumptions or big ones? Is it about considering the big picture or the fine detail?

The simple answer is that it has to be both... When we engage with our errors we improve.

And it's as true of Tai Chi as of business...

## **Performing the set – Stork cools wings, Brush knee, Play the pei-pa, and the Brush knee and Twist step sequence**

Judy Lee-Fenton and David Woollcott

Following on from the three previous Newsletters, the next move is Stork cools wings, which appears three times in the Tai Chi Set. From the Step up and raise hands position, the right arm comes under the left arm and you place the right foot at 45 degrees, parallel to the left foot but *without transferring the weight*. As you transfer the weight mainly to the right, the right hand moves down close to the right thigh and the left hand pushes forward to roughly the same height as the right shoulder. This position is a strong block with the left palm, right shoulder, arm, side and leg all lining up in a vertical plane.

From this position, place the ball of the left foot is a half step at 45 degrees in front of the right foot. As the right palm is pressed up, the left palm is pressed down with equal and opposite pressure. There is a very important spiral up to the left and into the Stork cools wings position. Be careful not to raise the right arm such that the right shoulder is raised.

The right arm forming a curve above and to the front of the head is a block deflecting a blow away from the body. The left palm down is also a block and is to protect the delicate lower regions!

The equal and opposite pressure mentioned above stretches the chest and back muscles while the spiralling up stretches the full length of the vertebra. Additional benefits to the central nervous system also occur. The Stork/Crane is a symbol of longevity and patience. The bird can stand on one leg in complete stillness, waiting for almost an eternity, for the perfect moment to strike in a counter-attack. This attribute of the Stork is said to have inspired Zhang San Fen, one of the founders of Tai Chi.

The Brush knee move appears four times throughout the Set. From the Stork cools wings, the right arm is drawn downwards with palm facing in towards the face while the left arm is raised with palm down until they reach the 'set-up' position. In a continuous movement, the right arm is extended back palm up and the left arm is raised to the front with palm facing outward. In the process, the hips and shoulders should turn 45 degrees to the right and both arms will be extended, without locking the elbows, at shoulder height if possible.

From this position, sit or relax into the hips. With the weight on the right foot step forward with the left foot. The left arm will start to pull back by bending at the elbow while the right arm, also bending at the elbow, will bring the right hand past the head to meet the left hand in the 'set-up' position. From here, the left hand is pushed palm down to just above the left knee. In the process of bringing the right arm through from behind, the hips and shoulders will start to square to the front.

You should feel very stable in the position which is, of course, a tor-yu. The left hand performs a low block and the right hand is pushed straight out in front in a central position to ward off an assailant. The left-hand Brush knee helps the heart and contraction and expansion movements work the lymph glands as well as massaging the lower digestive tract, which benefits stomach disorders aided by the Chi energy.

Play the pei-pa appears twice in the Set, both within this sequence of moves. With about 60 to 70% of the weight on the left foot from Brush knee, bring the right foot forward half a step at 45 degrees and place it flat behind the left foot. As you shift the weight from the front (left) foot to the back (right) foot, the waist moves the arms - the left with the palm facing inwards while the right arm goes back slightly. As the weight is on the right foot at 45 degrees to the right, that is the direction of our hips and shoulders. The left foot is then placed with only the heel touching the ground. The lowering of the elbows – as the arms are rotated until the right palm is facing the left elbow – also lowers the shoulders. This motion squares the hips and shoulders to the front through a spiral, even though the weight is on the right foot. This move is broadly a mirror image of Step up and raise hands and is a fairly typical pose (ready for action) used by martial arts practitioners.

This move tones and develops the abdominal and shoulder muscles plus the spine as a result of the spiral. In addition, it helps greatly with the flow of the lymph through the groin and underarm areas as it is full of contraction and expansion. The lymph gland has no pump to pass the lymph around the body, so needs as many contraction and expansion moves as possible. The lymph system follows close to the blood circulation system and with the lymph following close to the energy (Chi) system you can see how the one move helps all three systems at the same time.

Brush knee and twist steps occur three times with the left side and twice with the right side in the Set. Essentially, the left and right are mirror images, so the main elements include the need to swing down one arm from the front to the side and then up behind to shoulder level while rotating the extended arm palm up. The opposite arm is pushed forward palm away from the body. With the finish of each move, the hips and shoulders should be turned to the left or right at 45 degrees. These moves could be regarded as offensive in that the moves progress forward, one hand in front pushing away, perhaps grabbing and pulling down and back.

With these moves, there is progressive expansion and contraction of the chest area and the area at the top of the thighs. The opening and shutting of these areas with each step and expansion of the arms, sitting and standing, benefits the whole of the cardiovascular system and exercises the lymph glands. This is excellent for circulating Chi. It is the area of the heart centre, so it causes this centre to open and shut with each step and expansion of arms, circulating the Yin and Yang.

All these moves show how all three levels are worked upon at the same time, not forgetting the muscular system which every move aids.

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

Sue McKay

This is the verse, written by John Herring, inside a wonderful card made by his wife Joan and signed by all the Felsted class last Christmas. It is something they have done each year and is much appreciated by me.

Temperatures fall with the leaves  
Swept up by swirling wind  
As bright crisp days are with us  
And cold dark nights draw in.  
All creatures search for shelter  
Some sleep until the spring.  
While we walk in the wonderland.  
'Till Solstice bells do ring  
And we all know that most of this  
Is sentimental cobblers,  
Happy Christmas Sue from all of us,  
Your cheerful Thursday wobblers.

Val Harvey sent the following email to Mary earlier in the year:

I just wanted to send my thanks for the quarterly newsletter which I've really enjoyed reading. Enconced as I am, at a distance, in Portugal, it's an entertaining, warm and informative read and has helped me to feel connected with the wonderful Essex Tai Chi Academy and all that goes on therein!

### **Reminders**

- We all come to enjoy, and benefit from, Tai Chi for many different reasons. Please share your experiences with your fellow students through the Newsletter.
- Some of you reading this are currently not at all well. We send you very positive thoughts and remind you that you are welcome at class at any time, for however long you can manage.
- Subscription fees are due from 1 October.
- Samples of our new 'generic' yellow T-shirts – a 'cool' V-necked version and a cotton polo version (ideal for demos!) are doing the class rounds for the next week or so. They're only £5 each so do snap one up!
- The Lok-Hup Ba Fa class at Black Notley on Tuesdays from 11.30 will be starting from the beginning of the set in the next few weeks. Please let Mary know ([marydann@essectaichiacademy.com](mailto:marydann@essectaichiacademy.com)) if you are interested in attending the class.
- Upcoming workshop:  
Sunday 3 December – Tai Chi, St Ives

- We have received several student enquiries as a result of placing the 'all classes' flyer in the Community activities section at Maldon library. If you could help spread the Tai Chi word – including putting a copy in a mobile library – please ask your instructor for copies of the flyer.
- Spot the International Space Station. Our nearest cities are Cambridge and Chelmsford, so here are the dates, times, duration and where the ISS appears:  
*Tuesday, 3 October, 7.47pm*: Visible 3 mins; Appears 28 deg above WSW; Disappears 25 deg above E;  
*Wednesday, 4 October, 6.55 pm*: Visible 4 mins; Appears 34 deg above WSW; Disappears 11 deg above E;  
*Thursday 5 October, 7.39pm*: Appears 35 deg above W; Disappears 25 deg above E; Similar sightings 90 mins later, and for the following week.
- Please save stamps in the coming months, and we can decide to which charity to give them... The stamps should have a ¼" border and not be damaged. Any charity will also welcome the gold pre-printed label from the post office. Thank you.
- Our Christmas meal will be at Lian's Chinese restaurant in Witham on Tuesday 12 December. An email/ sign-up sheet will be circulating in classes shortly, with full details or you can email your interest in going to Judy Lee-Fenton ([judyfefenton@hotmail.com](mailto:judyfefenton@hotmail.com)).

### **Thought for the quarter**

This Newsletter's emphasis has been on improving without fear of failure. So we finish with a brief quote from Xenophanes:

The gods did not reveal from the beginning  
 All things to us, but in the course of time  
 Through seeking we may learn and know things better.

Xenophanes of Colophon was a Greek philosopher, theologian, poet and social and religious critic. He lived a life of travel, having left Ionia at the age of 25 to travel throughout the Greek world for another 67 years. Died 475BC.