

The Health/Martial Arts Link

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For some time I have been interested in the link between martial arts and health – particularly with regard to the practice of Tai Chi which is widely recognised as excellent for both.

In particular I have been intrigued by the questions:

“Why do the greatest health benefits come when the practice most closely follows martial effectiveness?”

and

“Why does focus on healthy practice bring significant development in martial skill?”

The following are some thoughts as to how Tai Chi in particular and martial arts practice in general relate to those two questions by looking at some of the elements involved and describing some achievable outcomes:-

Opening and closing – promotes resilience of the joints and aids pumping action of venous and lymphatic systems.

Spiralling – promotes resilience of the muscles and aids pumping of veins and lymph

Development of the body’s intrinsic strength of connective tissue and tendons optimises postural integrity even in fast movement. This improves balance and together with development of long twitch muscle fibres these promote a relaxed state of readiness in the muscles, which aids suppleness, long-term mobility, endurance and cardio-vascular recovery.

Wave propagation through the body by segmental contraction maximises use of muscular contractive ability and aids pumping of veins and lymph.

Opening and closing enable the body to maintain integrity and generate power in confined situations.

Spiralling allows maximum use of intrinsic tissue strength.

Wave propagation from centre permits transmission of energy from one part of the body to another and then to the outside with minimal movement.

Movement from the body’s centre of action maximises balance in dynamic mode. Improves balance and reduces falls in older age groups, while greatly aiding other physical activities such as sports and work.

Focus on structure aids balance and minimises the tension required to maintain posture. Ensures joints used optimally and comfortably.

Gentle but regular physical work improves cardio-vascular performance.

Quiet mind, quiet body minimise conscious interruptions and aid relaxation.

Development of “relaxed state of readiness” neither collapse nor tension keeps muscles in their optimal position for use – neither hypotonus nor hypertonus.

By relaxing the body and easing joints, improving posture, we reduce long held tensions derived from emotionally stressing experiences. We also prepare the body to better deal with present/future stress.

By working with partners we learn co-operatively to deal with confrontation, develop trust and allow ourselves to become more open and vulnerable. We also learn how to better deal with physical contact whether desired or unwanted.

Development of self-awareness promotes understanding of self and of others, at physiological and psychological levels.

In the achievement of continuing development, tai-chi practice provides a bodywork approach to dealing with mental/emotional health issues, which can present limits to physical ability. For example the belief that:

“I can't do that – I'm too old, too fat, too thin, too female, too male or - will fall over, will get hurt, will get hit, etc.”

will invariably prove to be self-fulfilling, but is often simply a fear based artificial mental/emotional construct or “block” that can often be demonstrated as untrue given the will on the part of the individual to discover their own potential. This facilitates a change of mind-set to exploring/extending boundaries rather than being simply constrained by them.

Development of optimal body usage improves health and is an essential prerequisite for development of martial skill.

Training for development of health is defined as “Tai Chi” - training for martial skill is defined as “Tai-Chi Chuan” and involves additional, more strenuous work for which the development of a healthy body is first required. Even if martial skill is the goal, focus on healthy body usage is crucial.

Intellectual study of a deeply emotionally connected physical activity provides a way of co-ordinating mental/emotional/physical energies leading to congruent behaviour, which is beneficial to development of holistic health/life skills and martial skill.

Health requires that the exercises be done completely otherwise gaps are left which leave the mind/body unbalanced and without achieving full health.

Martial skill requires optimal body usage in order that the body can absorb and transmit power effectively – so as the practitioner becomes used to dealing with more power then it becomes even more important to use the body in ways that allow it to operate without getting hurt i.e. healthily.

Development of martial skill then takes this healthy body usage and works to further develop the body strength and direct it in a variety of ways for the purpose of unbalancing, controlling and subduing opponents.

Thus for martial skill we first require healthy body usage, for health we need to work in the same direction – for both we need to do everything the same but need not go so far if our concern is only for health.

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