

Tai Chi – martial arts culture for beginners – some issues raised for students and teachers as observed from personal experience

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Introduction

It is my hope that the following will help “first timers” better understand and enjoy their early Tai Chi classes since I frequently come across beginners who attend Tai Chi sessions with absolutely no knowledge or understanding of what it is or how classes work - and it seems that this sometimes can lead to an unnecessary disappointment, and that the problem is really about expectations brought into the class – perhaps this piece will help align those expectations with the reality of a class without scaring anybody off – there is no reason to be put off, Tai Chi really is a gentle, caring activity – but it is important to understand that Tai Chi is “what it is” and not what you expect it to be coming from the outside. One might reasonable expect that by going to a class one is going to learn about Tai Chi and indeed of course one will – but the subject is so large and the range of expectations/behaviours so great that it cannot all be encompassed in an introductory class – or possibly a lifetime.

Perhaps the best single piece of advice I can offer is to “learn to look after yourself” in all the possible ways that implies and learn to work within your comfort zone – but that is a lesson in itself.

What is a beginner?

Beginners come to Tai Chi across a spectrum and of course one’s starting point affects the experience.

So, there are people who have absolutely no experience of any sort of movement or body work, those who have done sport, contact sports or dance perhaps, those who have experienced allied areas such as Alexander Technique, physiotherapy or body focused psychotherapy, then there are those who have studied martial arts in various depths.

Each will find different challenges and different lessons, both physically and psychologically. Many will find problems with the material or with the teacher – problems which generally originate within themselves. Tai Chi practice can be a path to resolving these internal issues or one can turn away and look for another path or another teacher.

After many years of teaching Tai Chi and even more practicing martial arts generally, I still find that some beginners would benefit from some advanced information. Those that have done martial arts before probably have it already, others not.

So, my apologies if the language or explanations come over “a bit rough”. I am simply trying from my experience to help newcomers to have their own enjoyable experience.

It seems fair to say that we all perceive things differently, especially physical contact, so what one person may perceive as a light touch not worth of note, or a playful push, another may see as a hit, a push or shove and an offensive, intrusive, personal attack. In a Tai Chi class these issues are highlighted – not because they are violent – but because the unprepared enter a new arena bringing their outside prejudices with them. Those with an open mind should have no problem.

Of course, the law still applies, but if you enter an arena of body work surely you expect to be touched and manipulated. This is comparable to being touched for a massage or physiotherapy – in short, the teacher is simply doing their job properly.

If you go on a course to study icebergs you should perhaps know enough not to be surprised that the course is cold, involves water and ice of which you cannot access the vast majority of the material information because it is hidden below the surface. So, it is with Tai Chi where most of the information comes from internal experience. This means that the internet aside, most of the answers are to come from personal physical practice. Like everything else icebergs are a creature of their environment – so is Tai Chi.

The first thing to understand is it that Tai Chi is at heart about developing a skill of using mind and body – a skill originally synthesised into a martial art. A quick Google search will immediately explain this e.g. by the NHS where they add that it is often practiced for health reasons. It is here that the problem starts – wanting to do “Tai Chi” as it is perceived from the mainstream media but not wanting to do Tai Chi as it actually is.

Interestingly it is quite possible to go to a class in the same way as it is possible to learn music, golf or tennis from a professional. However, the difference lies in the way that broadly the perceived character of the pursuit is already understood at the outset with music, golf or tennis – this is not the case with Tai Chi – some prior knowledge is useful here to avoid disappointment and enable

beginners to happily navigate their early sessions and to choose their path should they wish to continue.

It is often a surprise to someone new through the door that the class does not meet their expectations – although actually this is not really surprising if we consider the unusual culture of martial arts. So it is worth looking through a small window onto this culture in order to understand quite how different it is and the ways in which Tai Chi teachers adapt the subject to make it accessible to the general public – especially the older generations who may have lost over time the resilience of mind and body for which Tai Chi is justly admired, so come to Tai Chi classes seeking to redress those issues.

A health perspective

Tai Chi practice is excellent for such people in a health and balance perspective but many find it difficult to put aside their old habits which have led them to their present situation and to develop new ones – for example to change how they stand, walk or move, which would be improved by applying tai chi techniques, certainly this is a difficult process - but more so for some.

Over some 400 years Tai Chi practitioners have assembled a vast range of health practices so effectively that now people seek to learn the practice for the value of this alone, while not even realising the nature of the culture which makes these benefits possible – a culture which is predicated on the development of our bodies and minds for martial arts.

I usually start a new class by asking if anybody has any knowledge or experience of Tai Chi and find that the great majority have neither. Tai Chi is one activity where some prior research can avoid disappointment or finding oneself in the wrong class. Without this prior awareness some bring the consumer view that they are paying so they are entitled to control the class and to enjoy it – they simply do not know the etiquette and can unknowingly end up being rude and disruptive e.g. by insisting that they need to be taught in a particular way or be taught some particular routine when it is quite inappropriate. They sometimes feel disappointed and voice this to the detriment of the class as a whole – aside from being rude.

Tai Chi is unusual in martial arts in that it is sought out by many with absolutely no knowledge or experience of anything like it – and crucially with no interest in martial arts. Tai Chi was the only activity that the World Health Organisation found of benefit in reducing vulnerability to falls – in the order of a 50% reduction was seen.

Consequently, Tai Chi and related exercise form a significant part of falls prevention classes, over 50's classes and similar, and of course the teacher will teach accordingly – but students should be aware that everything else applies from the martial environment e.g. expectations in terms of respect, politeness, personal responsibility, honesty, commitment to learning and so on. Even for falls prevention the discipline derived of regular physical and mental practice from the traditional martial culture still applies.

This perceived split between health and martial arts is often problematic for non-martial artists. However if we see it through the perspective that Tai Chi first and always trains a body/mind to be relaxed, loose, flexible, balanced, elastic, resilient, to operate in the reality of the present (using the subconscious and the conscious together) - this is the health part which prepares the body/mind to be able to do other things with this ability. It was developed by martial artists for martial purposes

and is widely known and respected for this. We may consider that health practitioners are happy strolling in the foothills of the mountain learning the skills of using their bodies, a bit like walking and climbing in the Lake District – whereas martial artists are interested to climb higher mountains – some very high ones. We could note that the vast majority who go to the Lakes rarely get beyond 100yds from their car – much the same is true of people with regard Tai Chi. We all like looking at the mountains, some are happy on the periphery others want to go further, how high we climb is a question for us each to answer individually, but the principles and the disciplines are the same as learning from a walking guide or climbing instructor, who may be experienced on much more adventurous terrain but is happy to teach you simple basics to help you on your way up the nursery slopes.

Perhaps the most pervasive of all mistaken ideas is that of Tai Chi as a remedial therapy – it is not. It may be sometimes be so, dependent on the practitioner, but more usefully it provides an approach to understanding and managing oneself physically and mentally – as such this skill is more value as a preventative than as a post hoc remedy and really needs to be embarked upon in early to middle years – say up to 60. If left later, in deteriorating old age practice is likely to be more difficult and takes much more dedication for reduced reward.

In light of these observations it is helpful to begin a class with no expectations and not to bring previous experience with you. If you were or are a teacher – leave at the door what you think you know, if you are a respected senior person – put aside what you believe you are entitled to, whatever arena you have experience in or even expertise – remember here you are a beginner. Even if you are a Tai Chi expert attending someone else’s beginner’s class – it is of course courteous to let the teacher know - and then attend as a beginner, but if you are an expert you will know that already.

You do not have to do what the teacher suggests, how you do it is up to you – you are a fully responsible adult. You have no entitlement to enjoy the lesson but you do have an obligation to learn – daily practice is expected, however little. The teacher may at any time choose not to teach you.

A martial context

It is well recognised that if you were to go to a Karate or Ju Jitsu class then you could expect to engage in physical violence – mock or real as training progresses. Getting hit and thrown around is part of a normal lesson – I imagine that most who come to Tai Chi do not have this expectation. This is a situation usually made clear by the description of the class e.g. “beginners”, “health”, “falls prevention” for example designating a gentle introduction so that you and the teacher can come to understand your interest.

The whole point of a martial art is to learn potentially dangerous and therefore unusual things from others who have deeper knowledge, skill and experience in a fairly controlled and safe environment without suffering the harms of learning it from engaging in real fighting – i.e. without the risk of serious injury and death. We are dealing with a physical environment rather different to normal life where being rude or challenging in a social meeting may get you what you want, or at worst an angry response – i.e. there is no obvious (physical) downside to obnoxious behaviour – whereas a martial arts instructor is likely to ask you to leave or for you to demonstrate your skill.

You have perhaps paid for your class and believe you are owed what you think you have paid for, and a duty of care. Both are regarded somewhat differently by martial artists. The culture here is one of respecting the teacher, understanding that they are sharing their skill, money is important

but not core to the relationship, pain/discomfort is an aid to learning, the teacher teaches what they believe you need to learn at that time, you are personally responsible for yourself and for your training partner, trust is expected, strict honesty applies, humility is a given, physical correction (often bordering on intimate) is necessary and expected, the teacher will take care of you to a point – often variable dependant on what they consider appropriate in terms of pain or potential risk and what they believe you need to learn.

By all means question the teacher if you do not understand but given that you are a beginner wait until you have learned something before you do anything more challenging. Tai Chi is only for very few people and the drop-out rate is exceptionally high even for those with a health focus - do not be surprised if you do not enjoy the class or like the teacher – these are common experiences in the early stages. For example, some people think that after 10 weeks they will “know” tai chi, and therefore don’t need to carry on. Many others are disappointed that internal changes take time, when they want instant results. “My doctor told me that this will help with my aches and pains, but it hasn’t. But surprisingly I don’t trip up as much and getting in and out of bed is easier”. Think of this more like learning to play a musical instrument – everything is new, everything is different, everything may be confusing – this is correct. Improvements are slow and gradual – they depend on the observation and application of the student so I would encourage people to persevere until you do understand them. You could of course simply find another teacher but it is likely that the issues will be similar elsewhere.

Teachers

On a related theme do not expect your teacher to have qualifications in the academic sense – this is by no means a bad thing and may be a very good one - from a martial arts perspective one of the most important things to learn is how to tell who is good and who is not, and find a teacher who suits you. They may or may not be any good – it is often worth asking about their experience but it is not their responsibility to change to suit your expectations. My own experience has been that the most challenging of teachers have often turned out to be the best for me – remember the first class of any activity, with any teacher, anywhere is just “putting a toe in the water”.

Generally Tai Chi and other martial arts teachers are not primarily seeking to earn money – of course some run classes full time and most charge money – but money is not central to the arrangement. These people are more likely to be skilled expert enthusiasts who enjoy sharing their expertise with others and actually charge relatively small amounts. Their role is not one of “sharing secrets” – a common saying is that there are no secrets in Tai Chi – all is visible if you know how to look. So, the role of a teacher is more by way of a sharer, a helper, a guide.

A good Tai Chi teacher will have a very broad perspective on life and their art - from one aimed at dealing with conflict, where being hit or thrown in the course of training is perfectly normal and where pain and discomfort are used as a learning tool – through to a caring healing approach suitable to dealing with physical and mental health issues, such as posture, balance, stability, understanding of self and others. Generally, a teacher will have a different perspective to you – but that is why you are there. If you are not interested in martial arts this should be no barrier to learning Tai Chi for its health benefits and in a health class environment your teacher will not expect you to be – although many develop it as they train over a period of years. So please leave your preconceptions at the door and be welcome to learn in a different way.

Videos, books, labels

Broadly it is my experience that videos and books are of limited value learning choreography in the early stages – certainly I never found them useful until I had learned enough from a teacher to understand them. Students try but then tell me that they cannot learn from them. Their value seems to be in learning the history, some visualisations, some movement models and in motivation of one's self to continued practice. Like-wise names of movements and postures which rarely relate in any meaningful way to the physical action and can even be confusing - their only value being as a label for early beginners which allows a student to ask "how do I do xyz posture" just as easily dealt with by showing the move. My preference is to simply learn the form as a continuous movement in the first place and to do so as quickly as possible by virtue of regular practice.

Mirroring, copying and proprioception

Copying is absolutely vital and observing the teacher and self is just as important. However, often while watching a demonstration from the front, students start to copy the demonstration – almost always in mirror form which is confusing to themselves and to the teacher. They become subject to their mirror neurons which are really helpful in copying but not in viewing and observing – use the mind to study and inform, then practice from behind the teacher when you can simply allow the mirror neurons to do their job and yourself to copy and develop your proprioception. For similar reasons it is helpful to practice in the same position facing the same way, as this sets markers and a comfort zone you can orient and relax into.

Students

I am aware that many people who know nothing about Tai Chi (but encouraged by the media) view it as a "miracle cure" or type of healing to be considered as they might demand physiotherapy from the NHS. It is not, although it can facilitate healing if practiced in that way and I have many students who successfully do so. The exercises are the same but it is the attitude of the practitioner that makes the difference. Where a student does not get on with a specific teacher then they should simply go to another teacher or activity where they feel more comfortable – perhaps Alexander Technique with a different style of instructor.

Body work

People sometimes come to Tai Chi but find aspects of working with the body – their own and other people's – to be challenging. Some find it uncomfortable to be in contact with strangers. It is difficult to be sure but I am also aware that some women find it uncomfortable having a male teacher. This seems to particularly apply where physical correction is involved. It seems that some people bring issues with them into the class that make the learning process especially difficult however careful the teacher maybe, if this involves a female student and a male teacher the problem may be insurmountable. This is something that would not even be an issue in a martial arts class as it would be an expected part of the training – be assured that intimacy is respected – it is simply that close physical contact is sometimes required to correct postures or participate in exercises.

It appears there are many damaged people in our society – many of them very angry – who seek healing or release or hope in Tai Chi. They should be aware that Tai Chi can only serve as a framework for them to find what they are looking for – it may offer a pathway, a way of learning a skill, part of which is to learn how to look after oneself.

What you can expect from your instructor really depends on your level of interest – generally you may find a teacher who talks very little and simply demonstrates for you to copy. Copying is core to

learning Tai Chi at whatever level. Other teachers may talk quite a bit in order to explain actions, concepts, visualisations, body mechanics or psychology. All are likely to correct your posture by moving arms, legs, pelvis, torso, head etc. This is expected – they may or may not ask. If they don't and you do not want it, then say so.

What the instructor expects from you encompasses attention, politeness, respect for their experience and knowledge. Commitment to practice, personal responsibility – if it hurts, don't do it – don't complain, ask for help. Likewise, physical correction – they are doing their job – if you don't want it, say so.

Personal hands on correction – also partner work

Adjusting your body is an important part of Tai Chi at all levels. This allows adjustments to be made that simply cannot be described in words. 2nd party adjustment gives the opportunity for a student to experience relaxed movement by being moved – otherwise a student uses muscle tension to move which is exactly what we are trying to avoid. Very fine changes can be achieved, also one gets a better understanding of Tai Chi movement from the way the teacher uses their own body to achieve the adjustment.

Clearly, if you do not wish to be touched that is your right, but for martial artists it is a right which is put aside at the door and not even considered – it is covered under other areas such as mutual responsibility.

To our social norms these adjustments can go from light finger-tip contact on an arm to the sort of contact one would expect from a physiotherapist, a masseur or a chiropractor and when does a physiotherapist ask permission – you came through the door, that is enough.

If you want to understand Tai Chi beyond the level of “arm moving” this is an area which you must deal with, perhaps by conversation with the teacher or simply by developing trust in your teacher.

If you do not allow physical adjustment then you will greatly limit the extent to which your teacher can help, how much you can learn, how quickly you can learn.

While most Tai Chi work is done internally the same considerations apply with partner work – this is an important opportunity to interact with the outside world – in this case other people - and to gain an understanding of how each of us relates to each other through our bodies. Each partner is responsible for the care of their training partner – not the teacher.

Other expectations

What a beginner may expect in terms of health, wellbeing, ability to walk without falling and the time it takes for any changes to take place is hugely variable and in our litigious, consumer driven culture one simply cannot make claims about what one can expect – the experience is different for everyone and almost entirely dependent on the student themselves.

However, many students have found benefit in these areas – a quick trawl of the internet will produce many claims and stories.

My personal experience is that of learning a skill which allows me to move and manage my body better than I think I would have without my Tai Chi experience. Like a musician learning to play a musical instrument, my abilities depend on my personal input, natural ability and the limitations of my instrument (my body).

Personal responsibility

We are all adults in a class - your teacher can offer suggestions but the responsibility is the students. The same goes for partner work – each person is responsible for the care of their partner – not the teacher – you.

Timescales

Regarding the time for changes to take place – again this is entirely dependent on the individual and their own personal awareness. Some find changes in weeks or months, for others it can take years. Some cannot tell if they have changes, while these changes can be clearly seen by other people.

The situation is further complicated by the way that many leave it late in life to start Tai Chi – when their body is already declining, so they are seeking to reverse or stabilise the effects of aging when perhaps all that can be achieved is a slowing of the decline.

Personally, I advise starting Tai Chi before age 50 while still quite near the top of their curve.

Much of this is of no issue at all to beginners from other martial arts – their needs in this respect are different in that their habits of Body usage are ingrained in a different way.

Ultimately, you get out what you put in in both quality and quantity – consider your practice an investment.

How your learning may change as you change - it is to be expected that just as Tai Chi movement is experienced differently by each person so it is experienced differently each day and is dependent on mood and other factors.

As a student becomes looser what can be felt is likely to change, the feeling itself may change, new feelings may develop with new looseness, new balance, new agility and new experience, but all dependent on the age and degree of development of the practitioner.

Tai Chi will be different for someone in their 20s to someone in their 40s and 60s or 80s.

If one is not experienced in any form of body work, then a Tai Chi class can be quite challenging – if you are then it is usually welcoming – like coming home.

Impatience – comes in a number of forms – for example that of expecting everything to happen immediately on day one and that of thinking because one has done a few months or even years, that one knows more than they actually do. These can both lead to a frustrated desire to rush on “when are we going to do – x, y, z, e.g. the magic, advanced techniques etc?” or to thinking that “this sort of teaching does not suit me, I could progress quicker if I were taught the way I think I need to be taught”.

As a complete beginner this problem can arise from being expert in other areas, strong reliance on intellect and/or the diffuse nature of Tai Chi which can lead to the popular concept of it as a “magical arm waving” therapy.

The solution to this is education with cultivation of patience and self-awareness.

Education by reading widely, viewing YouTube, training with a range of teachers – gaining knowledge and understanding intellectually, physically and emotionally. Looking, observing, feeling, listening – asking questions of oneself, and one’s teachers. Perhaps the most important channel

being the questions found in push hands and in teaching. Learning your place in the world, understanding what you really need to learn, practicing and developing your skill.

Impatience of this sort can sometimes lead to a student being rude to the teacher directly (out of frustration) or otherwise being overly enthusiastic in showing others what one has learned to the point of “teaching” other students in someone else’s class – there is a fine line between sharing in a helpful way and being instructive, leading to a separate class within a class. The former is encouraged, the latter is just rude and disrespectful – but it is surprising how many relative beginners fall into this trap.

Gender issues

Simply do not exist in the “normal” western way in Tai Chi or other martial arts where an ethos of equality pervades with respect accorded to skill and experience. A person is a person, a body is a body. Tai Chi is at root a very practical, realistic and down to earth activity which may initially be uncomfortable for some.

In the west today it is probably true to say that most beginners to a health-based class may be broadly described as older ladies - as an older man myself this can make for an interesting shared cultural history and social conversation. However, this class profile often comes with its own prejudices and expectations which can give rise to sensitive issues – there is no intrinsic reason that this should be a problem – “a person is a person and a body is a body” in Tai Chi culture – sadly not everywhere else.

Other issues – Tai Chi is generally a caring environment where effort is respected but lack of effort leads to being ignored – why should the teacher put effort in if the student will not? If you feel this is happening to you then ask questions – Tai Chi teachers are mostly very patient with students who are putting in the effort.

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