

Speculation on origins of Tai Chi

By Ian Deavin

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www.sheffordtaichi.org, e-mail: ian@sheffordtaichi.org

Actually, this article is more a speculation on way that things accumulate organically over long periods – the way we humans pass things down the generations as cultural knowledge. Which may help in both understanding and learning Tai Chi – especially if you find it confusing and start asking questions like “why?”.

It seems reasonable to assume from history that people and the ancestors of people have been fighting for a very long time indeed and that therefore some of them probably started to practice so as to increase their chances of survival if nothing else. One can imagine this practice as a sort of parallel activity to social or ritualistic dance – it seems pretty certain that once societies started creating armies then the idea of practice to increase effectiveness was common so perhaps was born the idea of exercises, techniques and strategy.

Fighting of course creates a lot of physical damage, but so does practice which one can easily imagine led to an interest in medicine – fighting itself doesn’t actually take long, leaving extended periods in between for study of other beneficial knowledge – such as medicine, philosophy, magic, psychology, science etc.

So, in the early 1600’s in the middle of China a number of these practices and ideas came together at the Chen village in the person of Chen Wangting who created a unique synthesis of physical techniques together with many of these other areas of study including the philosophical world models of Taoism and Buddhism. This coming together of ideas and practices transitioned martial arts training from a base of individual specialist fighting techniques to a system of general training for the person to be able to deal with anything. It has stood the test of time in martial arts and has since proven an excellent lens for wider personal development of all kinds. It is a cultural movement that continues to absorb new information from anywhere so long as it is useful.

So, it is beneficial to think of Tai Chi as a practice for dealing with life, offering off shoots and byways of physical, intellectual and spiritual experience derived from the extensive traditional knowledge which has accumulated over the generations.

Welcome then to beginners – who can consider Tai Chi like any other form of specialist activity and can choose their level of involvement and direction of study dependent on their interest and needs. To compare with medicine for example one may well become a first aider, a para medic, a nurse, a doctor, a consultant? It really depends on how much you enjoy it, how rewarding you find it and so on. The training starts the same, a student only has to choose how far they wish to go.

www.sheffordtaichi.org

www.taichiblog.org

ian@sheffordtaichi.org