

Chi and body mapping and muscle power

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It seems to me that when we pattern our bodies through practice – directed by thought - to work according to Tai Chi principles - then we set up an internal pattern of muscle and nerve activation which feels like (and actually is) a flow of movement within our bodies that will be experienced differently for each of us. This feeling will follow the route of the sequential nerve activation and associated muscular action – in other words the patterned habitual way of moving actually creates an internal pattern of quite substantial order on an otherwise somewhat random internal environment - and can then become a way of directing our development by monitoring the way the feeling develops with practice and the way we are able to operate in the external world e.g. with others in partner practice and in normal daily tasks. Consequently we can anticipate this feeling becoming more noticeable and more defined as we practice.

So this feeling, which we can call Chi, provides us with a tool to map our body usage and to understand the areas around us in which we can operate effectively and how to do so – i.e. with balance and power. This establishes a volume of personal space – a volume which is quite organic in its shape and representing variable ability with pools of good capability and areas of not so good and a boundary of marginal capability (which may be a long way out from our body or quite close to it).

This operating volume - or comfort zone – defines how we can relate to others in a fight – in that we need to stay within those areas of maximum capability and to lead our opponent into their areas of vulnerability so that we can establish control – this is done by taking their balance - by what we call “finding their centre” while not allowing them to do the same to us.

By unbalancing we neutralise and control making the attack ineffective – doing this instinctively we respond instantly.

In developing this segmental, sequential, whip-like movement we practice slowly and carefully to create the detailed neurological patterns and the electrical pathways required.

The way of moving with Chi – i.e. internal power – means that the body can move with each muscle and joint only changing slightly – enabling optimal use of the fibres (which are more efficient and more powerful at small deviations around their mid-point) and with joints working around their most efficient range and angles of operation so producing maximum leverage.

Small integrated movements prove to be stronger and more sensitive in application – as well as gentler on the body.

This makes optimal use of whatever muscle power is available and explains why Tai Chi is valuable for old and disabled people – since it trains us to maximise the use of whatever we have.

That some Tai Chi practitioners are able to maintain this way of operating even with extended and very low postures demonstrates the degree of skill and physical development that it is possible to achieve with sufficient practice.

However when we wish to use power, we still need strong muscles to respond to the programming. In order to achieve this we seek to develop the way of moving – i.e. the control system – before looking to develop power. This is interesting from the perspective of those coming from external martial arts styles – since it means we need to put strength aside and focus on the soft detail until we have established the Chi based movement of an internal power control system. As the Tai Chi masters advise us - we should “invest in loss”.

How Tai Chi deals with this

Tai Chi comes at all of this from a very practical and pragmatic perspective – essentially a structured program which takes us through each natural stage producing a way of being tailored to dealing with change and external energies.

Kung Fu - daily repetitive practice of fluid forms and exercises involving effort, observation, exercise, consideration, refining. This enables the development of mind and body in a cyclical fashion – first developing skill – then physical ability – then skill and so on – at each step or cycle expanding the skill or physical ability into the space created on the previous cycle.

The six harmonies – developing harmonious movement externally and internally including careful focus on posture and balance

Meditation and Chi Kung – training mind and body independently - and to work together, both consciously and unconsciously.

Sung state of body and mind – achieving a state of potentiality (Wuji) and an ability to spontaneously create harmonious movement.

Partner work – e.g. pushing hands. In Tai Chi partner practice we train co-operatively to raise our skill level – so the relationship is somewhat mixed in its intention – on the one hand to unbalance and disrupt – but on the other to do so creatively in a way that enables both parties to observe and learn.

The eight energies - Jin – ways of exerting energy from the very lightest to the most powerful, - ward off, roll back, press, push, pluck, split, elbow and body stroke (peng, lu, ji, an, cai, lie, zhou, kao).

Stick, adhere, continue and follow (zhan, nian, lian, sui)

Falling into emptiness – we develop the ability to create emptiness for the opponent to fall into – so they are vulnerable e.g. to Fajin - issuing of explosive power.

Experienced teachers on whom to model our own movement and to present examples and opportunities for us to practice and develop skill.

A world model basis of Taoist philosophy:

Wuji – being in a state of potentiality

Wuwei leading to Tai Chi – spontaneous creation from a state of potentiality leading to instant harmonious action

Wuji – return to potentiality

Zen Buddhist style meditation - which encourages a mindful way of being.

Physically Tai Chi practice encourages tissue development in a number of areas:

Bones – by regular use of gravity and load based exercises from Chi Kung to forms and partner work, bones are kept healthy and strong.

Support tissues – tendons, ligaments, fasciae, joint capsules, small internal support muscles, slow twitch components of major muscles etc. are worked so that they respond by becoming stronger and more resilient.

Major mobilising muscles – by relieving these of a support role as far as possible they are enabled to relax and can be then trained in strength consistent with Chi style movement.

Tai Chi offers all these and other practices and at the same time encourages us to observe and to think deeply about what we are doing and why it works.