

Qigong and Tai Chi as a Path to Mindfulness

“If we can say that awareness itself is in some sense our true nature, then abiding in awareness can liberate us from getting stuck in any state of body or mind, thought or emotion, no matter how bad the circumstances may be or appear to be. But when we feel locked in the ice, for instance, we don’t even believe in the possibility of water, nor do we remember our true nature is beyond any of the forms it can assume.” - John Kabat-Zinn

The discussion is not intended as a structural comparison between the elements, aspects, and various techniques of Tai Chi/Qigong vs. Mindfulness Meditation. But rather an observation on their complementarity, and a suggestion that Tai Chi /Qigong can serve as a doorway to a deeper aspect of living a more balanced and mindful life.

In describing Tai Chi, I will be considering only Tai Chi for health in its more general practices as well as the simpler forms of Qigong. It’s also important to note that this topic excludes the martial lineages of Tai Chi Chuan, due to the exacting, and often stressful process of learning those honorable and remarkable martial arts.

INTRODUCTION

In an era of endless distractions, as more and more people in the west are encouraged to live entertainment based lives, and addictions of all kind run rampant, the ancient practices of qigong and tai chi can offer a path to mindful living. For many individuals living in our modern, megabits per second culture, sitting in mindful meditation seems an impossible task – an unapproachable, esoteric practice that just can’t be fit into their lives.

Yet countless numbers of people are seeking a way out of their daily stress, looking for healthy ways to cope, or seeking to find ways to take better care of themselves as they meet the challenges of everyday life. Over the years I’ve met many people who wanted a way out of their frantic lifestyles, but were so physically and mentally habituated to endless mindless activity, that they were deeply uncomfortable, and even felt disturbed, when attempting to sit in meditation. This experience of discouragement often triggered a sense of failure on their part, and some have commented that they were brought into contact with something that they were

too uncomfortable with to remain connected to. They felt either too physically uncomfortable to keep sitting, or they got freaked out by the content of their mental chatter. Also, there were folks who simply could not sit due to an injury or chronic medical condition.

Other individuals said that they “just can’t sit still”, and felt compelled to move. In listening to their comments, it became clear to me that shifting into direct sitting and silent meditation was just too much of a change from their usual state of being. In hearing their comments, the image that kept coming to mind was that of making a bullet train stop in an instant. These people needed to a way to slow down gradually, to allow them to reconnect with their deeper selves more slowly, and an internal space in which they could become comfortable with that awareness. I began to understand that living mindfully is a pretty revolutionary act.

The concept of Qigong and Tai Chi as a path to a mindful life contains the assumption that they are “transformative practices”, and if engaged in, will form a basis or foundation through which the practitioner will experience a shift in his/her state of being in the world. There are numerous anthropological/psychological definitions for “transformative practices”, but one that seems most apropos is put forth by Marilyn Schiltz et al¹. The authors list four “essential elements” necessary to constitute a transformative practice:

- ☯ Intention
- ☯ Attention
- ☯ Repetition
- ☯ Guidance

Traditional and contemporary forms of Qigong & Tai Chi contain all four of these elements.

The quality of the practitioner’s intention is a fundamental starting point. It’s necessary to be “checked-in” in order to receive full benefit from the practice. The intention to explore the practice with commitment and an open mind, serves to enable a different range of experiences; as opposed to merely “going through the motions”.

Attention is a key tool in responding to physical sensations and incessant, intrusive thoughts; and is used as the mechanism to bring the mind back to the breath without reactivity. However, the quality and focus of one’s attention can also deepen & evolve over time, and may also change application depending on one’s state of health.

¹ M. M. Schlitz, C. Vieten, T. Amorok, “Living Deeply: The Art & Science of Transformation in Everyday Life”, (2007): 88-89, 92-109

Repetition is demonstrated consistently in both Qigong and Tai Chi. The basic difference is that individual Qigong movements are usually repeated several times before moving onto another; while Tai Chi movements are done in a sequence, with that sequence then being repeated.

Guidance is evident in the many approaches to teaching these practices that have developed over millennia. The form of guidance can vary from the contemporary (newly evolved forms shared through modern media), to the classic (study of ancient texts and instruction formats that are thousands of years old).²

THE THRESHHOLD

“If you want to catch the grace of the wind, put up your sails. Practice!” – George Leonard

I’ve been teaching Tai Chi Easy®, Qigong, and wellness Tai Chi at my workplace for the past four years. During that time I’ve learned that people come to a class for a variety of reasons. Some arrive with simple curiosity. They’ve heard comments from friends and family, or have read things on the web and want to see what this “mindbody stuff” is about. Others have tried Tai Chi Chuan years ago and found it too difficult, but want to begin a general wellness practice. And some have been referred by their physicians, or heard recommendations by word of mouth from class participants. A few are dealing with chronic physical conditions and are seeking self-directed practices to complement their current medical treatment. There’s also folks with previous experience in some form(s) of “complementary healthcare” and are deliberately seeking a modality of self-care that they can regularly practice to build up/maintain their health, in addition to making broader healthy lifestyle choices.

Overall, many people start class because they are dealing with the physical/mental consequences of living in a general state of unawareness/oblivion and have come to realize that something needs to change. The most prevalent issue that brings people to class is habitual, unregulated stress at work and at home. This is often evidenced by a wide variety of physical conditions; high blood pressure, back problems, headaches, chronic worrying, addictions, sleep problems, emotional reactivity, digestive problems, maladaptive coping skills, perpetual distractions/activity, balance problems, and a lack of consistent moderate physical exercise.

² Ibid

In the past couple of decades we've seen a definite increase in the medical literature regarding mind/body practices and their positive effects on health³. Although there is a great range of quality in the older, smaller studies; we can look forward to present and future research to better translate the remarkable knowledge base of these ancient practices into our western medical/scientific framework. Mind and body, intention and action are no longer understood as separate things, but a continuum of aspects of human existence.

Tai Chi and Qigong have been recognized as ways to increase proprioception and as the practices deepen, inner awareness.⁴ As this sense of awareness grows, the practitioner begins to shift out of a state of oblivion (both physical and mental) and moves along a course of expanded awareness. This can be observed in lower levels of emotional reactivity, a decrease in compulsive over-eating, reduced pain levels, change in patterns of tension headaches, lower blood pressure, and increased ability to “stay grounded” in charged situations at work and at home, reduced incidence of falls, and a broad range of self-reported changes in quality of life concerns.

People come to class hoping to feel better, or at least get a momentary break. If their initial experience is positive, they usually come back. That's the first doorway – an entrance to the bridge, if you will.

THE BRIDGE

“Meditation, it's not what you think.”

Giving oneself permission to come to class and step out of mindless doing can be an act of courage and the first step on a path of self-care and intentful living. In contrast to logical expectations or assumptions, one of the first things participants become aware of is the extensive state of oblivion in their lives. As their mind calms, and awareness shifts, many participants begin to note how unawares they find themselves in daily circumstances. They report examples of “catching” themselves in states of being “checked out” or “on auto-pilot” in

³ P. M. Wayne PhD, with M. L. Fuerst , “The Harvard Medical School Guide to Tai Chi: 12 Weeks to a Healthy Body, Strong Heart & Sharp Mind”, (2013), throughout the book, the authors share the benefits of these practices for a wide range of health conditions and offer a broad range of clinical literature notes; See R. Jahnke, L. Larkey, C. Rogers, J. Etnier, “A Comprehensive Review of Health Benefits of Qigong and Tai Chi”, http://instituteofintegralqigongandtaichi.org/qigong_tai_chi_research/

⁴ P. M. Wayne PhD, with M. L. Fuerst , “The Harvard Medical School Guide to Tai Chi: 12 Weeks to a Healthy Body, Strong Heart & Sharp Mind”, (2013) : 193 and R, Jahnke, O.M.D., “The Healing Promise of Qi: Creating Extraordinary Wellness Through Qigong and Tai Chi,” (200):87

conversations, while working or driving. The initial experience of slower movement & inner quiet in class, usually contrasts sharply with their typical mental and physical state.

A state of mindless oblivion isn't something peculiar to modern life, as evidenced by this excerpt from *"The Secret of the Golden Flower"*, first published in English in 1929⁵, "On the whole, beginners suffer from two kinds of problems: oblivion and distraction. There is a device to get rid of them, which is simply to rest the mind on the breath." Shortly afterwards in the text, the author makes a critical point about levels of oblivion. "As for unawares oblivion and the oblivion of which you become aware, there is an inconceivable distance between them. Unawares oblivion is real oblivion; oblivion that you notice is not completely oblivious."⁶

It's a privilege to see these "light bulb" moments occur as participants continue to explore, and register, their levels of awareness.

One of the earliest things people become aware of in class arises as we move through the "Three Intentful Corrections" of posture, breath, and mind – are their unconscious postural habits. This step helps them to move into a deeper understanding of the unnecessary stress placed on their bodies when they stand/move mindlessly – with locked knees, arched backs, raised or hunched shoulders, and cocked hips. As they are invited to soften their knees, tuck the pelvis, lift the head, drop the shoulders and stand evenly on both legs; a postural alignment sets in. This is accompanied by the relaxation triggered when muscles are used appropriately, and others are allowed to rest. For some, it's the first time in years they've felt this way. Many people have the first of several "ah ha" experiences at this point, or will note a specific difference in how they feel and turn their attention inward to explore this "new" feeling state.

Following core principles of tai chi and qigong, the postural corrections are "allowed" to happen, rather than through an emphasis on some idea of pursuing external postural perfection. The former is consistent with the principle of wu wei, or non-doing. By becoming aware of how much stress, emotional reactivity, and armoring is evident in our bodies, we can then use the breath to gently release those aspects and ground ourselves in simply being present. This process can take a while, since people usually approach tai chi with baggage about "getting it right" or "copying the teacher". It's important to note that these external preoccupations are not the heart of tai chi or qigong. Next, we move on to the breath.

⁵ Master Lu Dongbin, transl. T. Cleary, *"The Secret of the Golden Flower: The Classic Chinese Book of Life"*, (1991): 23, 267

⁶ Ibid

By the time we reach kindergarten or first grade, most of us have become what is known as “upper chest” breathers.⁷ In adolescence this marginal pattern of breathing has become our unconscious norm. This is certainly not good for a rapidly developing brain and body!

In Qigong and Tai Chi the practitioner is initially encouraged to breathe from the lower dan tian⁸, the lower abdomen, and to then let the breath fill the torso and upper lungs. At first, this can be a bit uncomfortable. The sensation of discomfort and feeling of unfamiliarity become grist for the mill of awareness as the practitioner realizes there are layers of tension in his/her body. Over the years I’ve heard many people remark, “It was hard for me to take a deep breath”, or “I had no idea I was so tense”, or “Wow, I need to pay attention to this – no wonder I’m so tired all the time!” As participants are encouraged to work compassionately within their limits without judgment and explore their inner landscape, changes in sensation/perception are experienced and capacity is often expanded.

The third Intentful Correction is that of mind. As posture is aligned and breathing deepened, an invitation is extended to calm the mind by anchoring it on the breath. This allows a connection between mental activity and bodily sensation – enabling an inclusive awareness, grounding the mind. This also reassures the new practitioner that as unpredictable and intrusive thoughts present themselves, one needs solely to return focus to the breath, without reactivity or outward action. A mindful practice indeed! In our classes time is spent at the opening, throughout the movements, and at the closing to focus solely on this state of being in the present moment; without excess cognition or engagement of the ego. The endless chain of thoughts produced by “monkey mind” are simply a momentary occurrence to be noted – without reactivity.

Once the Three Intentful Corrections have been addressed we then step into “Open” posture. This is used as a vehicle to come to the present moment, with body & mind united. In qigong / tai chi class an initial experience of concentration, not on an object – but solely in being and calmness, can be a doorway into a different way of living. An awareness blossoms, that of a state of being, as opposed to non-stop, mindless doing.

⁷ G. Hendricks, “Conscious Breathing: Breathwork for Health, Stress Release, and Personal Mastery”, (1995):44

⁸ Fortunately, there are currently too many texts giving definition/description of the “dan tian” to list here. Basically, there are three dan tian - lower, middle, and upper, with the lower being the most commonly referred to in general tai chi / qigong practice, especially at the beginning. The lower dan tian is located in the abdomen, generally between the pubic bone and navel. The middle dan tian is set in the heart (using our western anatomical term, because in Chinese medicine and philosophy this is called the “heartmind”). The upper dan tian is located in the head. See K. Cohen, “Qigong: The Art and Science of Chinese Energy Healing”, (1997): 35-41. For an integral and considerate description of the dan tian, see R. Jahnke, O.M.D., “The Healing Promise of Qi: Creating Extraordinary Wellness Through Qigong and Ta Chi”, (2002) :63-67

Besides being a bridge into the present moment from a rushing world, these practices can also serve as a bridge connecting body and mind. Many of us spend a large part of our lives engaged in one or the other – but not both together. When overly focused on a task, we can very regularly push our bodies past healthy limits. When obsessed with mental preoccupations we can completely ignore the wisdom of our physical selves, resulting in injuries or eventually, states of chronic disease.

THE PATH

“In non-doing, nothing is left undone.” – Lao Tzu

In Qigong and Tai Chi movement is wedded with the breath. Breath is drawn into the body and movement gently follows as an expression of that vital essence. In the initial stage of learning a form(s) most participants do think a lot about their movements, but as they continue in the practices, detailed, linear thought falls away, and the principle of “stillness in movement, movement in stillness” is evidenced over time. The quality of that unity can be quite clear when observing someone who has been engaged with the practices for a while. There’s a fluid timelessness of deep stillness in their activity, a moving embodiment of the mindful now – similar to the practice of mindful walking taught by Zen monks. It’s important to clarify that outward physical grace and extended range of motion are not the ultimate focus. Profound inner stillness and awareness is the core.

Substantial health benefits have also been documented in practitioners who engage in physically modified practice. It’s not about how far you can bend, or stretch – but about the quality of moving breath & awareness throughout one’s being that’s the key; and engaging in the practices to delineate one’s deeper self from monkey mind. A taoist classic states this beautifully, “When there is attention in stillness, there is perceptivity in action.....Stillness is the foundation of action, action is the potential of stillness.”⁹

Body and breath together is one thing, but in order for a practice(s) to serve as a path to mindfulness it must address the incessant mental chatter and reactivity that is so prevalent in human life. In their recent book, *“The Harvard Medical School Guide to Tai Chi: 12 Weeks to a Healthy Body, Strong Heart & Sharp Mind”*, authors Peter M. Wayne and Mark L. Fuerst use a “Systems Biology Framework” to provide a functional western context for what happens in the bodymind as we engage with the practices. In reading their work, I was quickly struck by the

⁹ T. Cleary, trans., “The Book of Balance and Harmony: A Taoist Handbook”, (2003):9

very mindful teaching style used to instruct students. Practitioners are encouraged “not to think, but simply notice things as they are, without trying to fix or change them.”¹⁰ They also note a progression to mindful awareness as one continues to practice.¹¹ Moving in an integrated, meditative state, they experience stillness in motion and motion in stillness.

In everyday western culture, the model of mind vs. body is still dominant. The value of the concept and the embodiment of stillness seem to have been lost. I don’t think it matters if you trace this back to Descartes, the Puritans, or even the more recent industrial revolution where in daily occupations people set to work with machines – often pushing their bodies beyond healthy limits via repetitive motions. Much of the fitness industry in the U.S. also exemplifies this mind over matter, mind vs. body perspective.

In “The Miracle of Mindfulness”¹² Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh posits something quite different:

“... and so in the Sutra of Mindfulness, Buddha always uses the phrasing, “mindfulness of feeling in feeling, mindfulness of mind in mind.” Some have said that the Buddha used this phrasing in order to put emphasis on such words as feeling and mind, but I don’t think they have grasped the Buddha’s intention. Mindfulness of feeling in feeling is mindfulness of feeling directly while experiencing feeling, and certainly not a contemplation of some image of feeling which one creates to give feeling some objective, separate existence of its own outside of oneself. Descriptive words make it sound like a riddle or paradox or tongue twister: mindfulness of feeling in feeling is the mind experiencing mindfulness of the mind in the mind. The objectivity of an outside observer to examine something is the method of science, not the method of meditation.”

I would further this observation on enfolded existence, and our capacity to observe our various aspects, by paraphrasing that mindfulness of movement in movement is the mind experiencing mindfulness of the mind in the body.



¹⁰ P. M. Wayne PhD, with M. L. Fuerst , “The Harvard Medical School Guide to Tai Chi: 12 Weeks to a Healthy Body, Strong Heart & Sharp Mind”, (2013): 211-212

¹¹ Ibid

¹² T.N. Hahn, trans. M. Ho, “The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation”, (1975): 40-41

CONCLUSION

“To master change, nothing is more important than to know the time; to know the time, nothing is more important than to understand inner design; to understand inner design, nothing is more important than open calm.”

- The Book of Balance and Harmony

Qigong and Tai Chi are life affirming and vitality enhancement practices that can have profound effects on health and wellbeing. This can get very interesting for westerners who are not at all acquainted with the concept of life long self-improvement – or self-responsibility. Many of us, especially in the U.S., take better care of our cars than our own bodymind. Our daily routines can be quite mechanized (the opposite of mindful), and we literally drive ourselves through our lives. We consume stimulant drinks in the morning to jump start our day, use “energy drinks” in the afternoon, and then it’s alcohol/drugs at night to fall or remain asleep.

In my observations of class participants, once someone gets a real taste of present moment being, they want more. As their awareness expands, their lives change. The scales begin shift from mindless doing, to intentful being. Perhaps the most profound gift we can give ourselves, our loved ones, and our community, is to step out of oblivion and place ourselves on the Path.

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