

TAI CHI AND ME - thoughts of a layman (by Bob Price)

About eighteen months ago, I visited John Ding's Tai Chi Academy for the first time and had an introductory session. Prior to my first visit, I had no knowledge of what might be involved in Tai Chi and, I suspect, like most of the uninitiated, figured Tai Chi as simply a Chinese version of Karate.

To understand my reasons for deciding to give Tai Chi a try I need to explain, briefly, some of my personal history. Up until 1990, I kept myself involved in all kinds of sports from weight training to squash and considered myself quite fit. Then in June 1990, I had an accident that damaged my spine. I spent three months lying flat on my back while waiting for nature to run its course and slip everything back into place. Medical assistance amounted to pain killing and anti-inflammatory drugs. Apparently, there was little anyone could do; the spine is an area which anyone with a problem quickly discovers that the medical fraternity is at a loss to offer constructive help, apart from sending you to a physiotherapist. After I had recovered sufficiently to be mobile, I visited my local doctor and was told of an operation that might repair the damage to my spine. The odds however were, not good, with only a 20% chance of a full recovery, a 30% chance of no improvement at all and, a 50% chance of ending up in a wheelchair. I figured walking, no matter how painful, was preferable to a wheelchair. Over the course of the next two years, I spent somewhere about £2.5k on medical help for my condition, with osteopaths and physiotherapists but, because spinal damage is non-curable, sessions with either offered only short-term relief. Time itself proved the greatest healer and, 5 years after the accident, I had improved, though remaining a semi-invalid. My movements, particularly turning the neck or body was seriously restricted and painful. Mobility to me evolved into a measured process of avoiding pain by doing as little as possible. Further, I could do nothing quickly and, lifting even partially heavy items with outstretched arms was a definite no-no. Additionally I was vulnerable when sneezing and usually needed to sit down to sneeze in order to prevent myself from putting my back out. Whenever I ignored precautions I would end up flat on my back for up to six weeks at a time. In early 1996, when it was suggested that I give Tai Chi a try, understandably I did not think that I could either cope with a martial art or that it would result in doing me any good. However, my mentor brother-in-law, who had suffered with a heart condition, continued to recommend Tai Chi as a means of improving the quality of my life, providing examples of the various people at the club with diagnosed problems such as muscular sclerosis, asthma and back problems. Because he appeared to have grown more fit than I had ever known him to be since beginning practising Tai Chi and, because I was desperate enough to have a 'go' at anything in order to ease the regular bouts of back pain that I was suffering plus hating the lack of mobility. I finally went along. Watching the FORM for the first time made me wonder how such slow, artistic movements could be of any use as a self-defence tool, something quite different to the aggressiveness of karate. Initially it's hard not to feel a bit of a 'plonker' waving your arms around while keeping your legs bent, but as everyone else is doing the same thing you quickly ignore what you must look like and begin attempting to get the actions and postures correct. Also, within the space of only a few weeks, I had a result, my movements began to loosen up quite dramatically. The stiffness in my neck eased so much that I was able to turn my head round as far as I think it ever did prior to the accident, handy when driving, especially when you need to check right to see the traffic flow you want to join. Additionally, though the niggling twinges at the base of my spine did not go away, they certainly eased sufficiently for me to take less notice of them. Also, moving through the postures in the FORM began to make my body feel much suppler. In about three months I was turning my torso further than I had done in many years even after physiotherapy. Not surprisingly I decided that Tai Chi should feature more in my life, though a commitment of more than one lesson a week was not possible then. I now manage two a week and practise at home. The result is that my FORM has improved sufficiently to move to the next stage - Yin and Yang. Applying Yin and Yang to the FORM changes things. Your movements grow more structured and feel stronger and, for me, an odd sensation in the palm of my hands began to irritate enough to get noticed. Apparently this is the stirring of energy (Chi), but quite how the exercises and FORM help stimulate an individual's chi is a mystery. Also, at a recent Saturday seminar, John Ding zapped me for the first time. The experience of losing all muscular control, sinking to the floor and not being able to get up until John released me with a tap of his foot left me impressed but even more confused about the capabilities of Tai Chi. A Martial art, a means of keeping your health and a power source through an individual's ability to focus an internal energy, but what is it and how does it get focussed? I heard John compare the energies of two people as opposing magnets, the result of their contact being to push each other away. Interesting, but what else? How much input does the brain have and, why are some people more sensitive than others? The more you learn and experience the more you want to know - I suspect that ultimately, a fundamental part of Tai Chi is the need to learn and experience. What I have discovered is, that being zapped has nothing to do with hypnosis or auto-suggestion. When it was done to me I was totally unaware that it was going to happen and was wide awake throughout the experience. I saw and registered everything that occurred but cannot explain any of it. I have come a long way from talking about the good effects of Tai Chi for my spinal condition, but consider that I should end with this aspect. I do not want anyone to get the idea that I have been restored to normal, I haven't. What has happened is that I have regained much of my mobility and can now do many of the things I did prior to my accident, fully turning my torso at the waist, bending to lift things (my 4 children for starters). Additionally, the regular back pain I have suffered since 1990 has eased tremendously and, though it hasn't completely gone away, is much easier to live with. When I do suffer a relapse and, whatever is wrong with my spine does its thing and puts me flat on my back, over the past eighteen months this happened twice, my recovery time has been reduced from six weeks to three. Obviously I am hoping that the longer I practise Tai Chi the less chance there is that I suffer a relapse at all but, if I do, I hope that my recovery time will continue to decrease. These things in themselves have improved the quality of my life.