

Tai chi is a lot harder than it looks

Beginners learn two layered and complex movements a class, each stressing an oppositional rhythm



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It's easy to dismiss tai chi as something done by old people in a park.

Tai chi is essentially a slowed down form of martial arts. Every movement is a self-defence application in which the opponent is imagined. But for most people, the moving meditation is reason enough to commit to the practice. Tai chi has been shown to help people suffering with osteoarthritis, fibromyalgia, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. Calming yet active, it's a boon for boomers.

It can also be exceedingly layered and complex, as I learned when I began practising with Sifu Ali Siadatan, a third-generation student of tai chi master Yang Cheng-fu, and Andrew Hung of the Taoist Tai Chi Society. Out of a total of 108 movements, I only managed to learn seven or eight in as many weeks.

Both Mr. Siadatan and the TTCS follow the Yang school of tai chi (one of five styles, all named after the practice's founding families and dating back centuries), focusing on the memorization of a similar progression of movements to promote health. But as I soon learned, Mr. Siadatan goes deeper to help his students understand the meaning behind the movements.

The first time I showed up at Wu-Xing Martial Arts, an airy studio which Mr. Siadatan runs with his wife Shellie, I was told to join in with the other students who seemed to have a lot more experience than me. Beginners typically learn two movements per class and are instructed to stop and observe the others or repeat what they know as soon as they lose their place in the sequence. After the 108 movements are performed, everyone breaks off into groups depending on their levels and practises, practises, practises.

I met up with TTCS international director Andrew Hung in Grange Park in Toronto with a



Mr. Siadatan leads a class in a park near his studio: it's a beautiful yin and yang when the movements flow into each other. DELLA ROLLINS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

small group of disciples. They were very accepting and encouraging of my newbie status, gently introducing movements with exotic names like Grasping the Bird's Tail and Single Whip.

Learning tai chi is entirely different than, say, learning to dance like Usher (for anyone who's ever tried). There is a beautiful yin and yang or oppositional rhythm when the movements flow into each other. This carries over from its martial arts origins; the point is to meet an incoming attack softly, follow the motion and redirect swiftly with the force of an elastic band.

To help me understand the necessity of a relaxed body, Mr. Siadatan used the analogy of how young trees have flexible branches whereas the ones on dead trees are brittle and break easily.

All of this made perfect sense; but it would take several sessions

before I could feel the difference. Breathing adds another layer; inhaling happens when the abdominal wall contracts and exhaling happens when it expands. Apparently, this helps stimulate chi in the *tan tien*, an area below the navel that stores all our internal energy. This is why tai chi is said to increase energy rather than expend it (as running does, for example).

Among the most important points of tai chi according to Master Yang, who died in 1936, is the ability to "Distinguish Full and Empty." In a list of his instructions, recorded in 1925, he states, "If the weight of the whole body rests on the right leg, then the right leg is full and the left leg is empty... Only after distinguishing full and empty will our turning movements be light, nimble and effortless. If we are not able to make this distinction, then our

steps will be heavy and stiff. Our stance will be unsteady and we will be easily pulled off balance."

Mr. Hung could not reinforce the notion of balance enough. It is the first step to achieving skeletal alignment.

Mr. Siadatan reassured me that I wasn't a failure for not feeling my chi. "It's like a radio frequency," he insisted, adding that he is constantly aware of its energy around him. "You're just not tuned into the right dial."

The Taoist practice avoids discussing chi entirely – it's the equivalent of Tai Chi for Dummies. Mr. Siadatan's approach is more cerebral.

Tai chi can become "a gateway to the principles of strategy," he said, "which, in turn, can be employed throughout life. As we learn to deal with physical attacks using the principles of tai chi, our minds become equipped with

algorithms that allow us to deal with the aggressive forces that life throws at us."

Are there any advantages to doing tai chi en plein air? Mr. Siadatan, who does outdoor sessions once or twice a week during the summer, said there's no tradition that dictates grass over hardwood floor. But sensing the ground underfoot may help some appreciate the concept of sinking down, another fundamental principle.

As my last formal session with Mr. Hung ended, his parting words were, "This is the only thing you can do for the rest of your life."

Indeed, some day, I may just be one of those old people in the park (if I keep it up.)

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