

Tai Chi as A Spiritual Practice

By Hal Mosher

With the advent of these modern times and busy schedules, most people don't have time for spiritual practice, or more tragically don't see its benefit. Tai Chi as a martial arts practice is a complete meditation and spiritual practice no matter what religion you subscribe to.

The core element of a spiritual practice is that it provides a method of self discovery that brings you into a realization of the greater whole. Tai Chi develops a refined sense of awareness of your body unrivaled by most forms of meditation. Tai Chi combines breath, movement, verticality and shifting the weight which develop an awareness that can't be arrived at through sitting practice. Through the awareness of your body, Tai Chi will give you an awareness of the whole universe as a part of you. Most Tai Chi is done outdoors which allows for direct contact with nature. Through this daily contact, you can develop an intimate relationship with nature. Your movements will eventually feel like the movements of the trees, birds and whatever else is in your surroundings. The movements in Tai Chi should be natural like a cat crawling through the grass, or like a bird of prey soaring overhead. Tai Chi develops the ability to see the microcosm of your body function as reflection of the macrocosm of the universe. This deep connection with nature also happens as you develop in your chi gung practice in Tai Chi. When the chi in you body starts to resonate with the chi of heaven and earth you will have a an experience of closeness to nature that is quite profound. Being at one with nature is a common theme among spiritual disciplines throughout the world: Taoism, Paganism, shamanism and Christianity.

Tai Chi cultivates silence in the mind which has far reaching effects for the mind and body. When the mind is calm, then the body is calm. When the body is calm and centered, then life's challenges are not seen as injurious to the mind. This calmness of mind is to be cultivated in your practice at all times, because it will help you deal with people in a positive way that are angry with you or want to hurt you. Getting angry with those who are angry with you never helps the situation, it usually makes it worse. Instead, try to cultivate patience, because the stronger person knows when to walk away from a fight. Not because the person is the weaker of the two but because of the knowledge of the damage that can occur to both parties.

Some of the health benefits of Tai Chi are also related to its spiritual practice. The first and probably most important element related to health and spiritual progress is the straight spinal column during practice. All systems of meditation recognize that the body relaxes easier when the body is upright. When the body relaxes, the channels and charkas can let the energy move throughout the body. A majority of the charkas are along the spinal column. When the spine is straight like an arrow then these charkas become activated. As the energy flows through the charkas, then spiritual practice becomes much easier, because it feels good to open the charkas. This will inspire the body and mind to become attracted to meditation. Being upright is not only spiritually beneficial it also good for your health. Any chiropractor worth his salt knows that when the spine is naturally straight, the internal organs function correctly. The spine holds the central nervous system which regulates the organs and their functions. When the spine is off kilter then the nerves are pinched and their messages to the organs are muffled or even blocked. Keeping the spine straight also allows more blood flow to the brain which insures proper

functions of the internal organs. The spinal column usually has to fight gravity as we walk. Keeping our spine straight by bending our legs takes pressure off the muscles in the back.

Another health benefit of Tai Chi that is related to spiritual practice is using the waist to move. One of the problems with our Western busy lifestyles is that we are too cerebral and sedentary. We are constantly running the same tape loops in our heads. This creates worrying and tension which has ill effects on the body. By focusing our awareness on our waist or tan tien, we can move away slowly from the worried mind. Spiritual practice (and Tai Chi) teaches us that our worries are for the most part not relevant to our evolution. As we practice Tai Chi and think about the waist, the mind tends to clear out into openness. Using the waist to move also creates a gentle massage of the internal organs. Shifting the weight as we turn our waist amplifies the effect of this massage. The internal organs are stacked in humans and they can become stagnant if they don't get exercise. Tai Chi is the best exercise for this kind of massage because of its slow movements of the hips and waist combined with shifting the weight. Using the waist to move also brings blood flow to the hip joints which then increases their density which makes them less likely to deteriorate as we get older.

An important element in developing Tai Chi as a spiritual practice is the cosmological significance of the movements. The most basic elements in Chinese cosmology are Heaven and Earth. Heaven is represented in Tai Chi by lifting your headtop, while Earth is represented by sinking your weight. This binary system then derives yin and yang and the eight trigrams of the I Ching. The I Ching is a serious religious program of study in ancient Chinese culture which is usually complemented by the practice of Tai Chi. The I Ching represents basic patterns in our universe for movement and change, and through understanding these patterns enlightenment is attained. The I Ching is represented by the eight directions, and in Tai Chi these eight directions correspond to the eight tactics: wardoff, rollback, press, push, shoulder, elbow, pull, and split. When the eight directions are combined with Heaven and earth this covers ten directions. This kind of deep understanding of the directions and your orientation to them creates a profound relationship to the earth and allows an understanding of your position in the universe. The study of the I Ching gives you the keys to understanding your position in time. As you understand the I Ching deeper it gives you an indication of a proper course of action to take depending on signs or omens in nature.

The Tai Chi form starts with a meditation on emptiness, or wu chih in Taoism. The Buddhist tradition has many teachings on this practice, but for our purposes it is enough to say that it is a state without mental elaboration. For the Buddhists, emptiness creates a cause for future enlightenment, for the Taoists it is the beginning of the universe. If you are Christian you can meditate on what it would be like to be in God's presence. After this practice you begin to shift your weight onto one leg and this creates the universe cosmologically as you separate yin and yang. The form then leads you through all eight trigrams of the I Ching and the five elements which is everything we know of in this world and our surroundings. At the end of the practice, we rest back in a state of emptiness. In Tibetan Buddhism this is called practicing creation and completion stage yogas. Creation stage means that a pure universe is being created and that is where we as practitioners abide. Completion stage means that within this universe we meditate on emptiness or the lack of inherent existence of the universe (mandala) created. This is the quickest method to attain enlightenment in Tibetan Buddhism, because it purifies our natural

grasping at a self and the phenomenon within our universe. Tai Chi's cosmology is an abbreviated form of this practice from Tibetan Buddhism, the only difference being in the Tai Chi postures we are becoming deities within the universe or mandala. In addition, we meditate on specific energies moving through our bodies which are similar to what is called a body mandala practice in Tibetan Buddhism. The body mandala suggests that our body is made up of different deities and these deities control energy in our body and the world around us. Developing awareness of different energies moving through our body during Tai Chi practice has very similar effects. Tai Chi combines this type of internal movement of energy and postural movement in the same way it combines spiritual practice and body awareness. There is no doubt that there was some intermingling of these two traditions of Taoism and Buddhism in Chinese history. This would account for the cross training in meditation and martial arts that is common in ancient Chinese culture.

The next aspect of Tai Chi practice is combining the methods of calm abiding and special insight. Special insight is again meditating on emptiness that is conjoined with one pointed concentration. Meditating on emptiness has been explained above so I won't repeat it here. Calm Abiding is really just one pointed concentration on an object. In the case of Tai Chi, that object is up to you. It can be the breath, it can be the tantien, it can be just shifting the weight, any of these objects will do. The results are the same no matter which object you choose. You are trying to develop concentration that does not waver, and this concentration is then applied to emptiness as an object. In the Buddhist tradition practicing calm abiding and special insight together will lead to enlightenment. In Tai Chi this is done every time you practice the form correctly, that is without letting your mind wander. If you can keep your mind on one object throughout the form, you will develop a strong sense of mindfulness. Eventually, this mindfulness will help in your meditation as well, no matter which tradition you follow.

There are many other benefits to developing this type of concentration. The most important is that it helps you watch your mind. When you can control your mind you will become more peaceful and less likely to get agitated. From this state of mind it will then be much easier to practice patience and compassion, which I believe are the true results for any spiritual practice. Another benefit of developing this type of concentration is that it also puts the ego aside for a moment in order to exert the amount of effort needed to concentrate. Persisting in Tai Chi practice for a number of years does strange things to the ego. In the beginning, the ego says, "Go back to bed, you don't have to practice." Sometimes you listen to it, and this is how most people can stop their practice of Tai Chi. However, if you can go beyond that initial impulse to go back to bed, and at least put your clothes on then again your ego comes up with another excuse. "I'm too tired, or I have too much to do, etc." The best thing is to watch those impulses come up, and watch them go away as well. If you dwell on them the ego will overcome you. Tai Chi teaches us that we are our own worst enemy. We want to evolve but our conditioning holds us back. The ego has to be put in its place, and then pampered a bit. Work out really hard, and then give the ego a treat by going to a movie, or having a good meal. This will keep you coming back for more.

Real spiritual traditions living in a western culture don't get a lot of media reinforcement or encouragement. Tai Chi is not the Body Sculpting exercise that is so popular at the gyms today. Tai Chi will also not make you rich. As you invest more time in your practice, the ego brings up these points of contention as well. However, it is these difficulties in justifying your practice that

makes Tai Chi a real spiritual practice. As a practitioner, you have to know that Tai Chi is something that transcends the ego, and the media fads of the day by looking at your ego straight in the face and going beyond it.

One important element of Tai Chi is its emphasis on helping those that are being attacked. Tai Chi as a martial art has the unique ability of protecting you and your friends, while not harming the assailant but immobilizing him. In martial arts terminology Tai Chi absorbs the attacker's energy, and then gives it back to them usually in the form of a push. This type of self defense is a spiritual practice because it is based on ahimsa or nonviolence. Instead of being completely passive we look at our assailant with compassion and try to immobilize him out of concern for his own safety from bad karma. This may not always be possible, but we as practitioners should at least know that the assailant is working from a very troubled set of conditioning, one they cannot easily get out of. This then should elicit compassion for the attacker, and for all beings caught in habitual patterns. This type of altruistic intention is a very lofty spiritual practice.

Tai Chi has three levels to its spiritual development. These are represented by Earth, Man and Heaven. These have been enumerated in great detail in Cheng Man Ching's Thirteen Chapters. In the Earth stage we learn to relax our body and mind. As tension or *Li* is removed then *chi* or energy can fill up our body in its place. When this stage is completed the chi fills up the body completely and all movements are directed by it along with intention or *yi*. In the stage of Man the chi is not necessary for movement but only *yi* or intention. At this stage Tai Chi becomes formless, and the mind is infused with the movement inseparably. In Heaven stage the *yi* or intention now merges with the spirit or *shen*. At this stage there is no *chi* or *yi* but only spirit. According to legend, practitioners at this level can fly or walk through walls. These latter stages are almost impossible to achieve in one lifetime unless constant study and practice is maintained throughout each day.

Whether it be cosmologically, or viscerally, Tai Chi has many spiritual applications. Like most ancient systems of knowledge that we have intact today, Tai Chi integrates all the elements of our lives into the practice. Movement, meditation, martial arts and spirituality all become an avenue for exploring our selves and our relationship to the universe. Exploring this relationship is one of the most important things we can do for the evolution of our species in a time when this evolution is most needed. Tai Chi practice has all the elements necessary for the evolution of humans into highly spiritual beings.