

Seeking the dragon's pearl: reflections on the benefits of taijiquan & qigong for university students

Abstract

Every year for 25 years, prior to my retirement in July 2016, I taught Tai Chi and Qigong as part of a University movement class required for all drama students at the University of Windsor. I taught this course 2 to 4 times a year with 20 to 30 students in each class.

Seeking The Dragon's Pearl is a personal reflection on these 25 years. It takes a detailed look at a Special Projects course that provided students an opportunity to interact with an authentic Master of Taijiquan and Qigong. It presents research data, and anecdotal student and graduate reflections, on the benefits, to their health and to their lives, of Taijiquan & Qigong, and their associated philosophies and meditative practices.

Keywords: TCM, health, self care, taoism, buddhism, meditation, taijiquan, qigong, university students

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Seeking the dragon's pearl: reflections on the benefits of Taijiquan & Qigong for university students I

"The pearl has strong meaning in Asian folklore. Both Taoism and Buddhism use pearls as symbols of wisdom or enlightenment. Buddhism particularly depicts the pearl in the center of a lotus blossom as the ultimate wisdom in life. Since dragons were believed to be supernaturally wise, perhaps it is only natural that they should seek or hold such a treasure".²

Prologue: The researcher as drama/theatre specialist and martial artist

"In the West, a fundamental split is posited between mind and body"... "In the East, by contrast, the most widespread traditions assert a fundamental unity. Body and mind, spirit and matter, male and female interact in the dance which is the universe."³

I began my study of the Martial Arts in 1970. Since that time I have immersed myself in a continual and progressive study of various forms of internal and external martial arts and the philosophical writings which underpin them. Since 1993 I have exclusively studied Chinese Martial Arts.⁴

In 1975 I began to pursue a career in drama/theatre with a particular focus on the applications of drama/theatre in education and in 'therapy'. However until quite recently I had always seen these two aspects of my life (drama/theatre and martial arts) as separate one from the other: I failed to recognise or accept that my praxis connects the two.

This began to change in 1991 when on a brief research trip to Britain a colleague (a multi-talented man who teaches dance, drama and music) and I engaged in a discussion about his 'root' discipline. After some discussion he proclaimed that while he teaches drama and dance his discipline is Music. He then asked me what my discipline is, for like him I teach courses that cross disciplinary and artistic boundaries. For a few moments I was completely speechless. However as we conversed it became clear to us both that all my work is based on notions of "breath" and 'energy' (both connected by the concepts of Qi) rooted through my training in the internal martial arts.

Searching for connections

In 1993 I started teaching students an introduction to the Chinese 'Internal' Martial Arts of Taijiquan & Qigong as a part of a movement course required for all drama students at the University of Windsor. From 1993-96 many students of this course expressed strong unsolicited statements concerning the value of studying these Chinese Internal Arts both to their health and their studies in Drama in Education

In 1996 an opportunity arose to bring Master Hu⁵ an authentic Master of Taijiquan and Qigong to Windsor to work with students in our Drama in Education program. To this end I employed a little used Cross-Cultural Studies Special Projects course, to provide students the opportunity to interact with a master. A brief study was undertaken in which the responses of participants to their experiences were recorded and examined especially noting any connections made between the value of this study with a master of Taijiquan/Qigong to their health and their studies.

Meetings with a master-description of the course

This was a six-week course taught in the spring of 1996. It was designed to be flexible to enable participants to explore connections that interested them. The entire class met with me for whole group workshop/seminars three times during weeks 1 & 2. In these classes Tai Chi & Qigong forms taught previously⁶ were reviewed and students were prepared for the visit of Master Hu.

In week 3 Master George Ling Hu a Taoist¹ and an authentic Master of the Chinese Internal Martial Arts] taught classes in Tai Ji & Qigong and the principles of Taoism which underpin these Internal Martial Arts. The entire class met with Master Hu all day Saturday and on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday mornings: a total of 14 required contact hours. In addition 3 participants attended an optional 4-hour class offered by Master Hu on Sunday afternoon. In weeks 4, 5 & 6 the whole group met with me once a week for 3 hours at a time: a total of 18 required contact hours. The content included review of Tai Ji Quan/Qigong forms taught by Master Hu and discussion of readings.⁷ I also offered four optional 3-hour classes covering different topics identified as being of interest to different groups of students.

In addition to the required whole group workshop/seminars, participants worked in smaller groups on the update and revision of course materials (a handbook and video) for use in the Creative Movement and Voice course. Finally, students were encouraged to pursue independent study on a topic of their own choosing.

Searching for pearls

So the question at the end of the day was what these students learned from this course. What Pearls of wisdom did they gain from this meeting with a Master?

To try to find out, a research assistant unfamiliar with the Chinese Internal Martial Arts but conversant with drama / theatre in education theories and practices was hired.² The assistant collated and reviewed the course syllabus and materials which were then mapped and correlated for references to Tai Ji & Qigong, Drama in Education, personal development, work as a drama educator/theatre artist and any specific links connecting work in Chinese Internal Martial Arts to work in Drama/Theatre in Education. From this process, a short set of interview questions was developed.

The research assistant interviewed all participants approximately six months after the end of the course. These interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and in turn correlated and mapped for the items cited above. All of the data was then re-examined. Clusters of similar responses were noted, as were any patterns of responses to the phenomena experienced during the summer course. Discrepancies and unique responses were also logged.

From grains of sand -pearls may develop

What follows are a selection of responses grouped under specific topic heading

On the physical nature of chinese internal martial arts exercises

Many of the participants, while young and reasonably fit, found the physical nature of learning authentic Taijiquan & Qigong very demanding e.g.

"Who would believe that moving slowly and standing still could be so excruciatingly painful and difficult?"

Two participants commented specifically on the time spent holding individual postures. One suggested that

"Master Hu made us hold positions that were very uncomfortable for a very long time"

while another went as far as to say:

"I nearly died".

On body/self awareness

"(when we) were doing the Tai Chi and Chi Kung ... I noticed a big difference in my body rhythm...more relaxed and limber...a more positive attitude toward life and a higher energy level..."

"I also learned that many parts of my body affect each other, even parts that do not connect physically to each other."

"The body really tells you a lot, it forewarns you of pending illnesses and it tells you when to slow down your present activity." This is so very difficult for many people, especially westerners, to notice or acknowledge.³

On connections to performing arts

"Tai-Chi and Chi Kung are a type of drama that requires the participant to clear the mind and use the imagery to guide him through

the movements. It would be almost effortless for children to memorise the sequence since they would probably respond well to the imagery."

On health

In his teaching Master Hu not only spent a lot of time commenting on the health benefits of each exercise but also was very perceptive to the health problems of each participant. Often he presented individuals with a 'gift' of a specific exercise(s) to help them with their physical problems e.g.

"He showed me how to get rid of my headaches just by pressing on a point on my head and then massaging the top towards the back of my skull and it worked."

One participant remarked:

"What I remember most was one day when I was doing an exercise for breathing, Master Hu looking at all of us in the mirror and singling me out and pointing at me and saying I would have trouble doing this exercise because I have stomach problems. Just from looking at me he knew I had stomach problems, digestive problems and I thought that that was absolutely amazing. And for the rest of the course he helped me do exercises to solve those problems and help me with my posture a lot and I valued that extremely."

All of the participants for whom Master Hu had identified specific 'treatments' for physical problems identified that they continued to do the 'prescribed' Qigong exercises to prevent illness and maintain their health after the course finished.

On teaching

Several participants specifically mentioned Master Hu's way of teaching commenting on how he broke elements into smaller sections than they were used to e.g.

"Master Hu breaks it down into ten or fifteen minute sections and it was easier to learn ...especially with my short attention span"

Some participants connected the way they were taught to their own aspirations as teachers:

"Master Hu was so knowledgeable and skillful in his teaching that learning the material seemed natural. I can only hope to be as skillful in my own teaching practice."

"I have recently been thinking of not becoming just a high school drama teacher but using my Drama and Eastern Philosophies combined to teach students with learning disabilities...I can also introduce Taoism, Tai-Chi, Chi Kung and Ba Duan Jin to help them manage stress. Many Special Needs Students experience more anxiety and lack of self confidence than the average person does. I want to teach them to expend that negative energy into something positive to succeed in life."

Later that same life time....

I continued teaching Tai Chi and Qigong as part of the compulsory movement class every year for 25 years until my retirement in July 2016. I taught this course 2 to 4 times a year with 20 to 30 students⁸ in each class. Every year students commented on the benefits that they received from taking the traditional Chinese healing/martial arts part of the course.⁴

As part of research for another book⁹ a survey was sent to all the students I had taught over my four decades of teaching in Canada. The replies were very enlightening. Here are some samples of their responses.

One student said the following:

"... the Eastern movement ... forced a kind of 'quiet' that empowered mindfulness and forced us to get beyond the self-consciousness that our minds take us to when we are quietly moving in strange new ways".

Another commented

"... teaching (Eastern Movement) was extremely influential in my life!!!!!! ... (it) taught me:

- a. Body/mind awareness,
- b. Knowing yourself (and your body) through movement;
- c. How to stay in the 'here and now';
- d. Breathing (so under appreciated by our culture);
- e. Learning to listen to what your body says-- and respect it."
 - i. " Teaching Eastern Philosophy (Taoism) helped
 - a. Promote good health
 - b. Emphasized the importance of stress reduction through daily meditation and exercise
 - i. Practic(ing) the slow flowing movements and deep rhythmic breathing of Qigong for exercise, to improve posture and for relaxation
 - ii. (Teaching) Eastern medicine and traditions promote more natural and beneficial customs for living
 - iii. Life is better when you Breathe and Smile"⁵

Others commented

- a. ... I've ... stolen this mantra (breathe and Smile) and translated it to fit my French school as «Respire et affiche un sourire».
- b. ... all the tai chi movements - ... were so familiar to me as I grew up learning tai chi and martial arts... however, the kind of imagery you brought up would always make me laugh and remember.

The effects of qigong on health

...as an adult, I have been identified with a physical disability. Tai Chi is something that is easy on my joints, centers me with breath and makes me feel better. I'm glad to have learned it.

... Learning Tai Chi and the methodology behind it made a lasting impression. Movement became a part of my life ... so much so, that even after 18+ years of being away from Tai Chi, I came back.

.... (Practicing Qigong) improved my digestive system. Whenever I eat a large meal, I find myself rubbing my stomach to circulate the energy and help my digestive system.

... I went through a 4month period of insomnia. I had no idea why I could not fall asleep. I found myself getting one hour of sleep a night, and tried many different techniques to help cure myself. Finally, I found the cure, and the simplest technique: quiet your mind. ... This can easily be traced back to practicing Qi Gong – as we were encouraged to "let go" of all the stresses in our life,

... doing simple (qigong) exercises such as "picking up the heels", "pushing down the heels", and other straightforward physical activities daily. In doing this and eating healthy, I have lost weight. Since the beginning of the year I have lost almost twenty pounds!

... dealing with trauma from my child hood and the trauma of death of my son – I keep coming back to one posture "Stand like a tree"¹⁰ it provides comfort, allows for free breath movement, a hug from the energy that I cannot create or destroy only transform.

... Qigong practice has remained a part of my life 24 years after studying it at the University of Windsor. It has helped to heal me from many ailments that "got" me whenever I'd neglect my practice. I've had medical doctors be in awe of how I have been able to manipulate my health using qigong.

These written comments are just the tip of the iceberg. Over the past 25 years I have had unsolicited emails and texts from, and conversations with, former students of my eastern influenced movement classes. In reference to the teaching of Eastern movement and philosophies they speak of the value of the exercises to help in combatting anxiety, insomnia, body image issues [e.g. bulimia, anorexia].

They also comment on how the exercises and philosophies and meditative practices, Buddhist and especially Taoist, helped them increase in energy and focus and prepare for and accomplish completion of their academic tasks when they were at University. Perhaps more importantly many of them refer to how these exercises, philosophies and practices have continually helped them throughout life after leaving University, especially during periods of crisis.

Seeking the dragon's pearl – final observations

*When you seek it, You cannot find it!*¹¹

While the sample group discussed in this paper is limited and specialized, it is clear that each of the students involved in the meeting with a Master were able to find pearls of wisdom within the Eastern practices experienced. Even for students who were simply exposed to Eastern exercises, philosophies and practices in a compulsory movement class, many were changed by this exposure and several continued some of these activities and practices throughout their lives.

None of these students came in seeking to find pearls, and yet through participating in these classes, it is clear they did. However the pearls they found were not the same. This is no real surprise for no two pearls in nature are the same – the grains of sands from which they are created are all so different. So for the students, as in all human existence, no two experiences were the same. They each came into the class with different histories, interests and trainings and so created different pearls from the Eastern exercises, philosophies and practices; and, by all accounts, the pearls that they took away from studying them are still carried inside them and continue to enrich each of their lives.

Acknowledgment

None.

Conflict of interest

Author declares there is no conflict of interest towards this manuscript.

Endnotes

1. Drama in Education and Community, University of Windsor / Owner, Bear Moves Mountains 22 Mill St W. Leamington ON Canada. Email: merv123@uwindsor.ca
2. Spelling in this article is not uniform. When I first taught the classes I was using the Wade-Gilles spellings: Tai Chi Chuan and Chi Kung. I have now moved to using the more accepted Pinyin spellings: Tai Ji Quan and Qigong

3. Deby Fredericks "THE DRAGON'S PEARL", <https://wyrmlight.wordpress.com/2012/03/20/the-dragons-pearl/>
4. Peter Payne, *Martial Arts: the spiritual dimension*
5. Particularly Tai Ji Quan/Bagua Zhang/ Qigong.
6. Master George Ling Hu, my Sifu and friend, is a 21st Century master of Ba Gua, Sun Style Xing Yi Quan and as well as Qigong and several forms of Tai Ji Quan http://bajiquan.wikia.com/wiki/George_Hu_%E8%83%A1%E9%84%B0
7. In the earlier Movement course students learned a simple 'diluted' 'Crane Form Tai Chi' specifically 'tailored' to the abilities/level of the class; and basic standing Qigong exercises a simple version of the Ba Duan Jin. Master Hu taught 'authentic' forms e.g. "The Thirteen Kinetic Movements" of Tai Ji Quan (the basis for Yángjiā Michuán Tàijíquán) and "Swimming Dragon" Qigong.
8. Readings included: Tao of Pooh; Zen in The Martial Arts; The Way of Energy – amongst others
9. While the course was compulsory for Drama students, over the 25 years of teaching word got around and I signed in students from all over the University (Biology, Chemistry, Criminology, English, Engineering, Human Kinetics, Music, Religious Studies, Visual Arts etc.) wanting to take the course as an elective
10. Warren, B & McQueen-Fuentes, G., HEALTHY MOVEMENT: Simple Movement Approaches And Activities To Promote Good Health And Improve Quality Of Life. (In Progress – Routledge)
11. ¹⁰¹¹Stand Like a Tree (Wu Chi Position) is one of the so-called Medical Treasures of classical Qigong and the literal 'root' of the practice of Yi Chuan (Mind Boxing) also called Zhan Zhuang (Standing Like a Tree). For more information see: Warren, B. & Coughlin, J. (2014) STAND BREATHE SMILE: Simple standing exercises and approaches to reduce stress and promote good health. Tranquility Press, Oxford, UK
12. (Zen Riddle).

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5. Warren B, Coughlin J. *Stand breathe smile: Simple standing exercises and approaches to reduce stress and promote good health*. UK, Tranquility Press: Oxford; 2014.