

Tai chi getting social

Emma Lee

Emma Lee is an instructor with Tai Chi Life and has been practising tai chi with Barry McGinlay for 20 years. Representing Team Longfei, she has won over 50 gold medals in over 30 competitions and World, European and British Championship titles in pushing hands, and hand and weapon forms. But, she says, tai chi is much more than this and has a social aspect that has led to opportunities to travel and has created lasting friendships



When I joined my first tai chi class, I was a shy, self-conscious 25-year-old. I don't know the degree to which practising tai chi helped reduce that shyness against the other aspects of my life and the passing of time. However, I credit my tai chi class with having the biggest impact.

I work as a nurse and in this context I have found evidence to be all about peer-reviewed publications. However, for me there is no better evidence than experience. I have experienced the things I talk about in this article, and I have experienced other people's experiences of them.

The schedule

I have always been fiercely protective of my training time when it comes to relationships with a partner, friends, or family and work. When I qualified as a nurse, most of my colleagues chose to work on wards. I made sure to find a job without evening or weekend commitments so that I could continue to attend my tai chi classes. Later, when a promotion required me to work unsociable hours, I made the decision to change to another nursing job.

It is my time. I know that if I miss any classes I am doing myself and my training colleagues an injustice because I am interrupting my progress and potentially theirs. There are always excuses not to attend class, it is down to you not to make them.

In a tai chi class, you might practise some solo work but

in the main you are working alongside other people. Once you feel comfortable in a group you are less likely to want to let colleagues down by missing training sessions, which can encourage students to do their best to attend classes regularly.

The traininghall

Whether a class is held indoors or out, you still have to leave your home or workplace and travel there. The mental health benefits of having a focus and a place to go, where you feel safe and happy, are invaluable. It can mean the difference between keeping a lid on any problems with depression, and letting them boil over.

When you train in the same venue over a period of time, particularly when you have free reign to leave your mark on it, being there can feel like coming home. In fact, depending on your home situation, it can feel like a haven. For me it is my Eden. No matter how loud it is in the training hall it is still quieter, both audibly and in spirit, than my home.

Training colleagues

Stay in the same class for long enough and your training colleagues become like a second family. The relationships forged are special. First strangers, then colleagues, then partners. Over time some of them may become friends, but even if not, they still become your kung fu brothers and sisters – your tai chi family.

I have trained with some of my tai chi family for 19 years.



We have shared blood, sweat and tears. They see you and feel you – both physically and emotionally. In training there is no hiding. This is one of the things I love about partner work. It bares all. It is the silent conversation. The smells, the intention, the energy – you cannot hide these things from your partner. The challenges and subtleties of the practice expose your inner fears. These are unique relationships.

When practising applications and pushing hands you are often physically very close to your partner. This relationship can be challenging. Being so close to people you are not intimate with is a new concept to most of us. However, if you are open to it and stick to it you develop a freedom, a release, a joy. It is a privilege to be allowed into the personal space of another human being.

Whether you are practising a form in a group, or with a partner, or practising applications or pushing hands, there is an exchange, a cohesiveness. At least that is the aim. Wow, what an opportunity to communicate with people in a completely different way. Surely all practitioners have felt that satisfaction when a group form is conducted in unison. This is social interaction at its best. Quiet, respectful, mindful, working as a team.

I recall hours spent training in a park in Taiwan, trying to perfect the group forms that we would perform at the World Championships there. It was hard work. Repetition, repetition, repetition, with lots of scathing feedback from our coach. Every time we made a mistake, we let down the group. We practised the same routine again and again. Now, however, when I see those team members, I feel such a unique bond with them. The effort we put into working together as a team never leaves you. It cements a type of relationship unlike any other and is a privilege to experience.

Social media groups

Our school has a WhatsApp group, and our teacher encourages us to use it as a community. When you practise, share it, mention it, talk about it, post a photo or video of it. Practise humility and generosity and share the trials and tribulations of your practice with your training colleagues. It works. It encourages people to share, chat and ask questions. When it snowballs it is teeming and, when it quietens, our teacher stirs it up a little.



Social events and excursions

Christmas meals, attending seminars, training weekends away, demonstrations, competitions, and big once-in-a-lifetime trips; in a tai chi school all of this can be yours. Would I have visited half as many countries had I not joined a tai chi school? It really is a social practice. Tai chi offers a taste of another culture. When you fall in love with tai chi you fall in love with that culture and a door into a new world of social opportunities opens. 🌐

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