

Strange encounters

Jenny Peters

Call me a sceptic, writes Jenny Peters who teaches at the Kai Ming Association, but as soon as someone says to me “I can feel your chi” or “I think I have too much yin and not enough yang” I’m out of there

Once, a student told my husband he could see an aura of light around him and was sure that if he got too close, he would be thrown backwards by the power it contained. Well, all that told me was that perhaps my husband should have put on more deodorant that day.

You can read many many articles on the art’s mystical attributes, and that’s fine, but when our association, Kai Ming, was formed the committee of instructors decided our prime purpose was to open up the enigma that is tai chi, demystify it, look for western terms that could explain the eastern ones more clearly, and help people realise there is no magic, that the masters are only ordinary mortals who wanted that little bit more, so trained a great deal more.

I believe the true magic is within us all. The human body is the greatest tool we own, it has incredible engineering, wondrous powers of self healing, an efficient heating system (with built in thermostat), and ingenious plumbing linked to the waste disposal unit. Its electrical circuits alone would leave our computers standing, so, while we pay out lots of money to maintain these systems in our houses, we leave our best investment, our bodies, to look after itself.

As a nurse, I think tai chi may be the key to the maintenance, that we need. Also, maybe because I’m a nurse, I cannot equate with chi and meridians. For these I substitute oxygen and circulation. Those I can understand.

I recently read two articles written by people who say they have experienced life-changing benefits from tai chi. This is wonderful. It is great that they have felt elated enough to tell the world, the only problem I have with this is that both of them only acknowledged the yin or soft female qualities of tai chi, which is in itself, talking unbalance. Yin and yang, male and female, hard and soft, light and dark, they all go together.

One chap repeatedly said we should use tai chi in everyday life, when working, driving, shopping, socialising, sleeping. But although I read patiently through the whole article, he never actually divulged the secret of how to do this. The closest he got was to say you should flow through each day like a river. The theory of this statement is excellent, the instruction on how to attain this ability is sadly lacking.

The second article involved a man ‘finding himself’ by working through his grief and depression when practising the form. Obviously there was much more to his story than that, but I began to feel uncomfortable, when in the concluding chapter, he extolled the healing properties of his clothing or a hand brushing against parts of his body and the feelings this gave him of washing away his emotional problems.

Neither of these men mentioned the whole that is tai chi.

The old adage: ‘the more the merrier’, in this art should read: ‘the more I see the more confused I get’. It is extremely difficult for the average student to know good from bad, right from wrong, pukka from dodgy.

Just try to imagine if you went into a superstore to buy

a tin of dog food and discovered they had a whole floor devoted to just that, hundreds and hundreds of the same product, but with a different manufacturer, all professing to be the healthiest, tastiest, and all the same price. How would you decide which to buy. You could ask someone who worked there which was the best. In the case of tai chi this would equate to



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asking your instructor. If you follow this advice you will no doubt find out where he got all those little pearls of wisdom from which he quotes in class, supposedly off the top of his head.

Perhaps the main point is, don’t believe everything you read. Just because it has been published doesn’t mean it is right. Even as you are reading this, you should be thinking: “She may be right, she may be wrong, I’ll have a look on her club’s website, and see what their view is.”

I realise there is a vast market for relaxation classes and many tai chi teachers just teach these techniques. This might be because their own knowledge is limited but in my opinion such classes should not be advertised as tai chi, but as Chinese exercises.

When my husband was looking to begin training he attended an introduction night. The instructor was quite well known in our city, but, as we found out later, was not accepted by the governing bodies as teaching a recognised style. He came home looking bemused, and told me that the students, bearing in mind they were complete strangers, had, after the initial talk, spent several minutes running their hands up and down each others’ bodies trying to feel the chi. He didn’t stay to find out if anyone could feel his.

Later, when he was qualified, he tried to find teachers from other schools to practice with. One said: “No, I’m afraid you can’t come to my class or train with me, but we could sit and talk about tai chi if you like.” Another who was Chinese said I do not do push hands in my style. His style turned out to be his ‘family’ style. Which, after viewing his video, seemed to be ‘made up, wave your arms about, try to look ethereal’.

So having read about some of our encounters of the strange kind, perhaps you will understand my nervousness when cornered by a chi fanatic. I sometimes wish I could develop my own ring of confidence to repel them when overdosed by mystical jargon. 🌀