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- The physician as patient
- The doctor in hospital
- Health and healing
- Recovery from alcoholism – a model for healing
- Improving cancer care
- Alternative treatments for depression
- Tai Chi – lessons for the art of psychotherapy

## *Plus*

- News
- Reviews
- Events
- Research update
- From the frontline

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# Tai Chi – lessons for the art of psychotherapy

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I am a chartered counselling psychologist who has been working in the NHS and in private practice for over 20 years. I have always had an interest in mind/body relationships, and my particular current focus is the psychological and physiological sequelae to trauma.

Ashley Conway

I am the principal and head instructor of the Zi Liang Tai Chi Chuan Academy. I previously worked in mental health and am a qualified RNMH. After training for over 30 years in Chinese martial arts I now devote myself full time to the development of Tai Chi Chuan, both its health benefits and as a martial art. I have a particular interest in how the principles of Tai Chi can be applied to physical therapies such as osteopathy, and the psychological therapies of the West.

Choo Poh Ong

## Summary

Essentials for the good practice of Tai Chi such as: feeling centred, being in a state of relaxation which is alert, using inner strength, deflecting the energy of another, sensitivity to timing, and an awareness of how subtle change can have significant impact, may all have parallels for psychotherapy. The authors believe that psychotherapy has many lessons to learn from the wisdom of the ancient art of Tai Chi.

*Nothing in the world is softer and more supple than water,  
Yet when attacking the hard and strong, nothing can surpass it.  
The supple overcomes the hard,  
The soft overcomes the strong.*

Tao Teh Ching – Chapter 78

## Antecedents/prologue

Ashley Conway

About three years ago I was looking for an activity/discipline to pursue that would be good in helping me to de-stress. As I spend a large part of my working day sitting down, I decided that something involving movement would be best. I have always had a vague interest in martial arts, but had never pursued it before. I did not feel attracted to something that was dominated by dramatic kicking and punching, but I liked the idea that I might learn some skills that could be useful if I needed some self defence skills. Tai Chi felt like the obvious choice.

Although I had not trained in martial arts before, I knew what kind of teacher I wanted – and did not want. I did not want somebody who was mostly interested in demonstrating how tough or skilled they were, I

wanted somebody with considerable experience, who was dedicated to their art, and who had high standards. I was incredibly lucky to find Choo Poh Ong, who was teaching in my area.

Although I have played numerous sports in my life, I had never before been through a disciplined physical (and mental) training like Tai Chi. I quickly found that the effects on my mind were as good as those on my body. I would go into a session tense, and come out calm. This pattern repeated, and I began to commit myself to more serious training. I discovered a colleague at a local psychiatric hospital who told me that he was giving Tai Chi classes to inpatients, and that they were much calmer afterwards. I asked him why he thought that was. His response was that he thought that in attending so carefully to the specific moves, individuals were forced to be in the

present – while doing the Tai Chi training they could not be looking back at distress in the past, or fretting about concerns for the future. For that hour the individual is kept in the present. This seems a good explanation to me. I suspect that if somebody looked, they would find changes in neurological activity during the practice of Tai Chi. Anyway, I am happy to go on with my training in the knowledge that it is one of the most powerful ways for me to de-stress my life.

While in Penang this year, attending a Tai Chi masterclass organised by Choo Poh Ong, I started at the end of each day jotting down sentences from the day that seemed relevant to my work as a counselling psychologist. When I first talked to Choo Poh Ong about this, he initially seemed a little uncertain, but this rapidly evolved into active and energetic participation in the production of this paper.

## Introduction

Many of the lessons of Tai Chi could be applied to different forms of holistic therapies, particularly the kinds of approach taken by hands-on bodyworkers, but the specific interest of this paper is in the applications to psychotherapy.

Psychotherapy is a process in which one person (the therapist) facilitates psychological and/or physiological change in another (the client) through the process of talking. Tai Chi is an ancient Chinese art that involves a series of specific movements, and can be practised individually for health maintenance or restoration, or it can be applied as a martial art. There is great emphasis that the physical movement is guided by the mind. Many of the eastern martial arts have their roots in Tai Chi.

This article was written after Ashley Conway had spent two years as a pupil of Tai Chi with Choo Poh Ong, and both had been members of a small group spending two weeks in Penang in the Spring of 2006, to train with Choo Poh Ong's master, Master Lim Lai Leong, an expert authority on the art of Tai Chi and its applications. Ashley Conway has been growing increasingly concerned that in the obsessive focus on the *science* of psychology (academic training, randomised controlled trials, cost effectiveness, evidence based practice etc), there is a severe risk of losing sight of the *art* of therapy. We came to recognise many areas that psychotherapy and applied Tai Chi have in common, and that the relatively modern western art of psychotherapy has much to learn from the ancient art of the east.

Firstly, we believe that it is easy, at first glance, to underestimate both. Tai Chi frequently appears in the media as images of old people in a park making what appear to be very simple movements, and at first glance psychotherapy can appear to be two people sitting around chatting. For Tai Chi the learning of the initial

movements in accordance with its principles is a necessary precedent to applications, and this idea of learning to know one's centre has its parallels in the psychotherapist learning to know themselves, and being able to maintain their own psychological centre. In Tai Chi students do not go on to applications until they understand/feel their centre. In psychotherapy we believe that there is no point in entering into interaction with another until one has a good sense of oneself. Paradoxically, in our 21st century world, both disciplines currently face the challenge of meeting a consumerist western ideal of getting something quickly with minimal effort or discipline. Martial arts have people who want to know how to fight in six weeks, and psychotherapy has to deal with people or organisations offering quick fix cures, and training schools that specifically state that they consider it irrelevant for a therapist to have done any personal therapy themselves. Knowing oneself is now considered by some irrelevant for interaction with the client. It seems to us as rational as suggesting that people can teach martial arts without knowing if they can stand on one leg.

Martial arts and Tai Chi have models of hard and soft combat, and inner and outer strength. Hard martial arts meet force with force, and soft ones move like a reed in water – absorbing and deflecting energy. There may be parallels in psychology – the hard styles, like CBT, being overtly confronting and challenging, and the softer, more psychoanalytic styles being more sensitive to moving with the client's energy. Outer strength is what appears visible – for example the inflated muscles of the bodybuilder – inner strength is much more linked to the mind-body, and enables an experienced Tai Chi practitioner to hold a stance for long periods of time that others would find unbearable. It would also enable the skilled martial artist to deliver a large amount of energy with a minimal amount of effort. Again the parallel with psychology – a strong outer self/ego may be fine much of the time, but when the going gets difficult (like listening to, and staying present with, a client as they recount their experiences of abuse or torture) an inner strength is called for. Flexing of psychological muscles will help neither the therapist nor the client in this situation.

## Training

Can you be a natural? Of course some individuals may be blessed with a physical co-ordination that seems to have been there from birth (or maybe conception), so that they seem able to excel at almost any sport. Likewise it seems probable that some individuals are born with a natural intelligence or a quick mind. Of course these factors are likely to be advantageous in the relevant chosen paths. But they are not enough.



Naturally early environment is likely to make a difference. For a physical art plenty of exercise and activity that would enhance body awareness and develop co-ordination is likely to help. Psychologically, a child growing up in an environment where attention to the situation and the feelings of others is important is likely to help develop a sensitivity to others.

## “ Good martial art and good therapy need constant practice ”

Can you learn it quickly? Neither Tai Chi nor psychotherapy can be learned like the 12-times table. In martial arts movements can be learned and steps can be rehearsed. A therapist can study texts on body language, read about active listening, and study the research on success rates of different psychological interventions. Both can become a kind of expert: but an expert who knows nothing about how to practise their art. The formulae and the rationalising can be learned relatively quickly. The art takes years of training and experience. It is the difference between the intellectual ‘knowing’ of something and really knowing it at a profound, unconscious, feeling level. And the journey never ends. We would both caution against ‘experts’ who believe that they have got it all. Good martial art and good therapy need constant practice, constant supervision and constant evolution. The journey has no end (at least in this lifetime, adds Choo Poh Ong!).

And what of trainers? Choo Poh Ong once remarked that training in martial arts with 10 world masters does

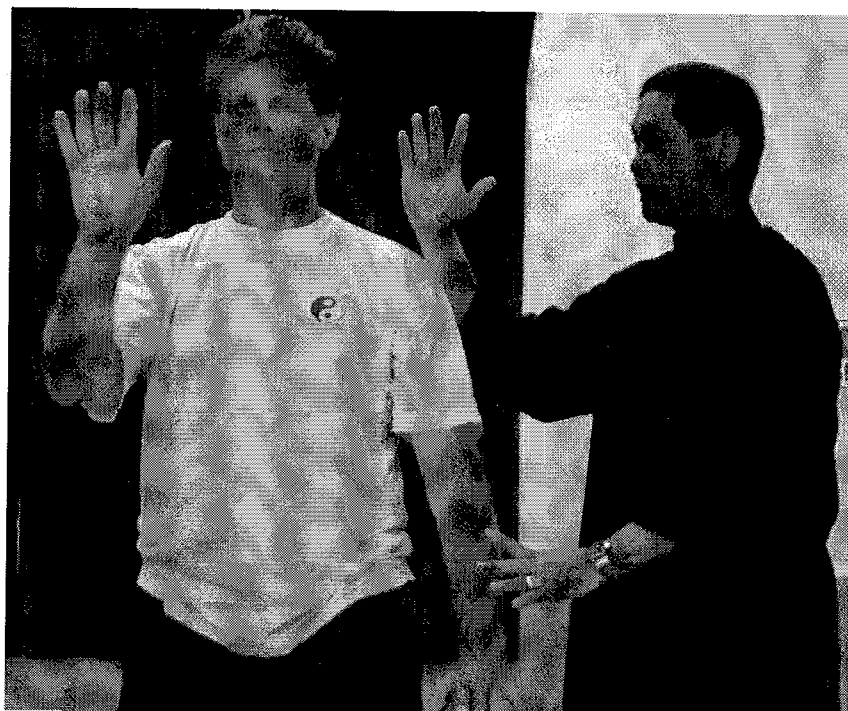
not make one a master. Ashley would share the same reticence about a therapist who had trained with experts from 10 different fields of psychology. If the therapist had trained with experts in addictions, trauma, personality disorder, psychosomatic illness – with styles ranging through CBT, debriefing, NLP, 12 step etc, then there would be at least two possible interpretations. Either this is an extraordinary individual who has a fantastic capacity to take in information and learn new skills incredibly quickly. Or this is someone who skims the surface of numerous disciplines, and never *really* knows any of them. Like the tourist who believes they has seen the world because they went on a luxury round the world cruise, spending one day in a port in 10 different countries. This is not to say that a breadth of knowledge is not a good thing – obviously it can be extremely helpful for a therapist to be informed about a wide range of disciplines – but this should not be mistaken for expertise in the craft of each field.

## “ Breadth of knowledge...should not be mistaken for expertise in the craft of each field ”

### Lessons for a therapist

While in Penang Ashley heard a number of simply expressed statements about Tai Chi that have wonderful parallels in therapy. ‘Give way, but remain in control’ was one of these. A therapist who meets a pathological belief or behaviour head on is often likely to meet resistance, either in the form of hostility, non-compliance, or simply in the outcome of the client failing to return for future sessions, and abandoning the process of therapy. The skill of the therapist is in allowing the client the energy of their problem, without being overridden by it – to absorb it, deflect it and ultimately to retain control.

This control is increased by learning another lesson from Tai Chi. If one is not relaxed, it is hard to be in tune with oneself, and know one’s own feeling. If this tension is taken into the therapeutic setting, and felt in the room, it is hard to tell whether it is coming from the therapist or the client. In Tai Chi there is much emphasis placed on being in a state of awareness, while at the same time being relaxed. In the application, it is recognised that this state of alert relaxation enables one to



be highly sensitive to what is going on with the other person. This might be observing that they are very slightly off balance in one direction, and therefore a small nudge in exactly the right place at exactly the right time can have a profound effect. We believe that good therapy works the same way – when the therapist is alert and attentive and relaxed, they can become very sensitive to the subtleties of a client's fixed psychological position, and with experience and skill can learn when a small nudge in the right direction can produce a profound outcome.

A well trained psychotherapist is like a well trained martial artist. Both have to be continually aware of the basics. All the moves can be rehearsed and worked out in a role play. And then real life happens. The successful therapist, like the successful fighter, must be able to adapt their choreographed moves to the natural situation, and flow with the energy of the other. The listening should be with all of the senses. Watching people who are good at martial arts, it is easy to think that they must have a sixth sense. They seem to know when the other is going to move and how and where, all in the same moment that it happens. More prosaically, we think that what they are doing is becoming super-sensitive through most of their senses. They will attend to sight, sound, smell and feel (Ashley remembers being told in one class not to lose physical contact with his opponent – otherwise how could I know how he felt?). Obviously in therapy some of these modes will not be appropriate – but we believe that it is possible to become exquisitely sensitive to our clients – through multiple sensory channels. Ashley can certainly recall occasions where he has felt very tuned in to a client and they have said 'you knew that I was going to say that, didn't you?' The honest answer has been yes – as surely as the experienced Tai Chi practitioner correctly knew that the next movement from their opponent was going to be a righthanded punch to the abdomen.

A strong base in oneself (physically and psychologically) enables one to sense with high definition. If a psychotherapist is sitting opposite a client and feeling their stomach knotting up as a scene is being described, is this a message about the therapist or the client? (This is the form of unconscious communication that psychotherapists call counter-transference). For the psychotherapist to have a strong base in themselves would enable them to be confident that it is telling them something about the other, and help them to be prepared for what it is about (the client's rage, fear or whatever).

In physical training, as in therapy, it is up to the teacher/therapist to match the pace of the pupil/client. If the pace is run too fast the pupil is unlikely to keep up or learn. A good therapist will sense when to push, when to hold and when to back off, and must work at the level and pace that is appropriate for where the



client is at that time. This will vary between sessions and even within a session.

In Tai Chi small movements can have great effect. This is often because the opponent's energy is being deflected rather than met head on, and the energy of the other may then be used to advantage. The outcome produced by a movement of the hand and a turn of

the waist is that the entire energy of a charging opponent can be controlled and directed in a way not expected at all by the other. A very disturbed patient is screaming: 'You hate me and want to get me locked up'. Screaming back is not likely to help. But you do think they need to be kept somewhere secure for a while. Quiet agreement, softly spoken, is more likely to deflect them: 'Yes I do want to see you in a safe environment for a while, because I care about what happens to you, and want to know that you are OK'.

### In Tai Chi small movements can have great effect

In the martial art timing is key. A small movement at exactly the moment when an opponent is slightly off balance will put them on the floor, when the same movement a second either side in time would have little effect. We believe that in therapy there are moments when the right phrase or comment or confrontation will go right to the heart of the matter, and produce profound change. We believe that it is difficult (but not impossible) to teach this, and hopefully a good sense of timing gets more refined with passing years of experience.

There are certain simple rules that may apply in all contexts, though they are too often forgotten.

- 1 Learn from mistakes. Go over them, look at them honestly, analyse what was done wrong or could have been done differently, plan how things could be done differently if a similar situation occurred in the future.
- 2 Know your limitations, and do not feel compelled to do anything. If there is a man wandering around your house with a shotgun it's better to call the police than try to apply your martial arts skills. If a patient is psychotic and dangerous, they need hospitalisation and medication – it is not a time for clever words. Part of being good at what you do is knowing when to pass the job over to someone else with different skills.

