

Perfect harmony

Marianka Swain finds out why t'ai chi is becoming a national phenomenon and how it can benefit dancers

“When I started out, people would gawp at you; now, if we're doing t'ai chi in the park, no one bats an eyelid,” notes Emma Westlake of Oxford School of Tai Chi Chuan & Chi Kung. Fellow teacher Tim Parsons of Natural Way T'ai Chi in Bristol agrees: “It was pretty much unheard of when I began in the 1980s, but these days most people have seen it on YouTube. It's definitely becoming more accepted.”

A big part of t'ai chi's success is its broad appeal, believes

Emma: “Young people tend to like the martial arts, while at the other end of the spectrum, it's hugely beneficial for older people – you're constantly learning new things, and it keeps you active without any risk of injury. I have students in their eighties, still going strong!”

It also crosses the gender divide, explains Cheryl Markosky, who takes classes at the Meiquan Academy of Taiji in London with her husband Peter: “I think it appeals to men because they don't see it as girly – you can

embrace the warrior aspect of it. There are certainly more guys in my beginner t'ai chi class than my beginner ballroom class.”

While Cheryl finds it complements ballroom and loves the poetry of the Chinese names for movements, Peter thinks t'ai chi “is nearer to boxing than dancing”. However, he does like “the unusual combination of exercise, balance and Zen contemplation. You feel partly as if you've been meditating, but you've also had a real workout. It's great for my golf, as both operate

on the principle of completing a set of connected actions without being too aggressive.”

That calm approach also makes it accessible, notes Cheryl: “If you don't get the steps straightaway in a jazzy aerobics class, you panic! This moves at a gentle pace, but it's still high impact – you definitely feel it afterwards.” She likes that it's not competitive, “as we all work together in a grid, taking turns to lead and follow, which means you learn different things from different people. I'm short, so I have to make my steps slightly bigger, and the taller guys around me make theirs slightly smaller. You're in your own zone, but part of a community at the same time.”

“That combination of self-awareness and awareness of others is key,” agrees Emma. “When you do mirrored partner

work, you figure out how you're deviating from each other, which is great for life as well – understanding your energy flow and how it relates to other people. We're becoming more divorced from that awareness the more we rely on technology, so this is a chance to redress the balance.”

“It's wonderful watching someone let go of patterns of tension they didn't even realise they had,” observes Tim. “People

start a class closed off, and by the end they're open and happy. T'ai chi addresses three levels: physical, energetic and quality of mind, and once you develop that extra awareness, you can apply it to other things – one of my students was working out on a cross trainer and realised he could get far greater distance and pace by using t'ai chi principles to relax and be more efficient.”

Five ways t'ai chi benefits dancers

1. Helps you remember sequences of movements.
2. Encourages you to see something new and try it, without overthinking.
3. Lets you channel energy by being grounded.
4. Makes you concentrate on perfecting one physical thing.
5. Helps men learn softness and women strength, so we can balance one another.

DANCEFEATURE

"Tai chi offers a very practical spirituality," says Emma. "It's definitely more holistic than going to the gym, but you can think of a class like a laboratory – we're not forcing something on you, we're helping each individual figure out what they need. Some people sit at their desks too much and they need to strengthen up; others are too uptight, so they need to release tension."

"It's a great solution for health problems – there are studies in China showing how much it helps people recovering from heart attacks, and the recent Age Concern guide *Promoting Mental Health and Well-being in Later Life* highlighted some of tai chi's major benefits, such as

maintaining mobility and flexibility."

Tim had a positive experience working with a special needs group for the NHS's Phoenix Trust: "There was one man who was too disturbed to join in the class – he kept hitting himself, and he was obviously in distress – so he sat on one side while I taught. By the end, he was beaming; he hadn't even taken part, but he was so strongly influenced by the changes in the room. It was a brilliant way for the carers to release tension as well."

"It has a lovely philosophy," agrees Cheryl. "You come away feeling relaxed and rejuvenated at the same time. It also gives you great physical confidence – I want to know that when I become a

grandparent, I can dash out into the road and save my grandchild without a sudden movement giving me a knee injury."

Emma adds: "Tai chi is all about the flow of energy through the body, and when you harness that, it can be powerful. We tend to look for quick solutions, but this is a real long-term investment, and it's also something that gives people enormous joy." ●

For more information on classes, visit:
Oxford School of Tai Chi Chuan & Chi Kung www.oxfordtaichi.co.uk
Natural Way Tai Chi www.naturalwaytaichi.co.uk
Meiquan Academy of Taiji www.taichinews.com

