

TAI CHI CHUAN as an Aid to Epilepsy

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I have been epileptic for twelve years and a player of T'ai Chi Chuan for nearly eight. One of the reasons I took up T'ai Chi was to benefit my health, and over the last 2 years I have been actively investigating the role of TCC practice in my epilepsy management. Thus far, two distinct advantages of practice have presented themselves to me firstly, T'ai Chi as an ongoing preventative measure; and secondly, as a framework for instantaneous seizure management. The following story tells how T'ai Chi helped me process a major seizure fifteen months ago.

I had returned home from a student party when I felt the prelude to a grand mal seizure ('tonic/clonic' the classic convulsions and loss of consciousness). I usually experience such preludes as a partially felt, partially heard vibration along my centre line, often with sensations in the head area. Although I had been drinking and smoking, I knew that particular vibration meant I was about to fit.

Centering myself, I noticed that concentrating on Tan Tien gave me a sense of the fit approaching from a particular direction -North West. As if responding to the actions of a partner in a game of Pushing Hands, I began to move, applying T'ai Chi principles as I had learned them. I found that this 'responding' action felt good and seemed to soothe the fit, so I continued.

The ensuing movement involved elements Of dance, Five Rhythms work, Qi Gong (Hua style) and T'ai Chi Chuan (Ch'eng Man Ching style), along with the occasional vocalisation, prayer or mental image. Throughout the process I sought to maintain awareness in a similar manner to my T'ai Chi practice, yet with the intention that the movement was a vehicle for the expression of the fit. I did not know whether I would reach an end to the movement or collapse, and banished such thoughts as they arose, as it was necessary to concentrate on moving.

During the movement I jumped once, and noticed that the strength of the fit increased dramatically whilst I was in the air; so thereafter I kept my feet on the ground except to step. I was wobbly and unstable in the beginning of this session but I don't remember losing my balance to the point of failing over. I believe that if I had fallen a full convulsion would have occurred. There was definitely a sense of having dealt well or poorly with the incoming 'attack' of the fit at any given point poor responses on my part meant more work for me; better responses seemed to have an 'effortless' quality. I don't imagine the whole thing would have looked like a T'ai Chi form, as the movement was occasionally fast or sometimes flurid. I did notice some of the forms occurring within the movement, though. I remember Separate Left Foot, Ward Off and Rollback in particular, with Snake Creeps Down being a difficult move, as the change in elevation increased the sensation of incoming seizure.

Fortunately the room I occupied at that time was large and I had most of the floor space clear for use approximately 3m x 3m. I estimate having been in motion for 15 to 20 minutes in total, with a couple of minutes standing still to finish. I actually came to rest about five minutes from the end, yet did not feel secure the fit was not completely dissipated or harmonised so I returned to the movement in the same way as before; as though Pushing Hands. When I no longer felt the urge to move I stood in the Beginning posture and noticed that the epilepsy seemed to have passed. I could have spent some more time moving but it would have been 'manufactured' movement in comparison to what had gone

before, and possibly a waste of energy to boot. I was not exhausted, as was usually the case with my grand mal usually requiring a day or two's bed rest. In contrast, felt similar to having just completed a satisfying form. I was also stone cold sober again and after a few moments quiet reflection I went on to enjoy a restful nights sleep, awakening refreshed and 'normal' the following day.

I feel it is important to mention that I had been practising regularly (not just attending a class) for just over six years prior to that episode. During those six years, in consultation with longstanding medical support, I had reduced the sodium valproate tablets I previously relied on from three per day to three per week. Currently I manage well on only a couple of tablets per month, a fact helped by the relative low severity of my epilepsy in comparison with many people.

With regard to the ongoing management of my epilepsy and its relationship to daily Qi Gong practice, I find it sometimes helps me to view an everyday activity as a meditation on how epilepsy arises in my body. The Qi Gong allows a way to include quite diverse activities (e.g. playing guitar, belaying a climber, lifting a tray) among my observations as I learn about the conditions I work with. I find the vocabulary of Qi Gong has a helpful and harmonising effect on both my state of mind and the frequency and intensity of any seizures I may have.

I notice that I am less disciplined nowadays than when I began practicing. From the first, I believed that daily practice would help reduce the incidence of seizures, and as time passed, this intuition proved correct. I don't recall any particular moment of epiphany, rather a gathering sense of awareness of my body energies which is taking years. I have had occasions when I am experiencing sensations in the body yet unsure whether they originate from epilepsy or Qi Gong, which can be unsettling. At these times during practice, I come to a boundary where I can choose either to venture further into the sensations or to stick to the mechanism of the practice. The usual alternative being to cease practice and close down, which I tend to choose if I don't feel able to manage relative danger.

I would guess that regular practice of a physical discipline in which awareness of the Tan Tien or Hara is cultivated served to act as a focus for my mind during the maelstrom of the epileptic seizure, whether grand mal or petit mal. My own trajectory on this learning curve took in first Hatha Yoga, then Ki Aikido, and finally T'ai Chi Chuan. I have been fortunate enough to be able to investigate various kinds of healing methods whilst attempting to get the mix right, and my epilepsy management also draws on some of these. To this I have been able to add some techniques from the Theatre course I recently completed for my degree.

It seems that epilepsy is specific to each individual, so to some the use of somatic or exercise systems may prompt episodes rather than reduce them. I have found that in my own case regular Chi Kung and T'ai Chi Chuan practice has reduced the frequency of incidences, and I believe the practice is a major factor in my being able to rely less on anti-convulsant medication. Further research into the Internal Arts may contribute towards a workable seizure control technique for mild epilepsy. I would be most interested to hear the stories of anyone else with experiences in these areas, and I am most grateful to all the teachers I have had along the way thus far.

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