

Teaching Tai Chi for Chronic Pain

Dr Matthew Brewer

I am asked regularly by teachers of Tai Chi and Qigong about the work we do with chronic pain patients in the UK National Health Service. Here is a short overview.

How it started

It began in 1997, when the inimitable Brian Cookman marched up to the local hospital in Canterbury and declared, to anyone who would listen, that he wanted to teach Tai Chi there. He was lucky enough to find a receptive ear in Val Conway, who was the head of the Pain Clinic at the time.

So we began to teach Tai Chi to chronic pain patients, unpaid. At first, all of our patients were referred by Val. It took what seemed years, but it was probably eighteen months, for the doctors to begin to refer patients to us. They were very sceptical, but gradually came around when they saw the change in patients on whom no other treatment had worked. A year or so later they started to pay Brian. It was a real breakthrough.

Early in 2003 Brian moved up to Cambridge and handed the running of the Pain Clinic Tai Chi to me. I ran it until 2007 when there was a restructuring of many services in the NHS including ours. I was then asked to design and co-ordinate the Tai Chi for Chronic Pain Service throughout East Kent. My long term students and I are now teaching at ten sites, from Folkestone to the Isle of Sheppey.

Who we teach

While many of our patients have back and joint problems (injuries, arthritis, sciatica), we have been able to help people to combat a broad range of chronic illnesses including: circulatory problems (heart function, hardening of veins and arteries, lack of circulation in the hands and feet, high and low blood pressure, oedema), breathing problems (Asthma, Bronchitis, Emphysema, COPD), nerve problems (MS, nerve damage, peripheral neuropathy), lack of energy (Chronic Fatigue, ME, low immunity), digestive problems (IBS, Crohn's disease), hypermobility spectrum disorders, problems with balance, stress related illnesses and Fibromyalgia.

What we teach

The core of our teaching is the *jibengong* set taught by master B. K. Frantzis as Energy Gates.¹ Within the set we focus on standing and sitting alignments, the Cloud Hands movement, which is a very old precursor to the Cloud Hands found in all traditional Tai Chi forms, and the preliminary exercise of the spinal stretch,² usually done sitting. We slowly and gently work our way through the layers of the Cloud Hands movement. Once the patients can shift and turn stably and comfortably we apply it to walking. Learning how to avoid falling onto the stepping leg is a particularly useful skill for those in chronic pain. Generally, the application of these exercises to daily movement is very important to this group. We usually finish each class with five to ten minutes of Longevity Breathing,³ emphasising circularity of the breath to let go of tension and release the nervous system.

During the Energy Gates Qigong Instructor Training in 2001, master Frantzis commented that 80% of the people who we teach will need Energy Gates first and foremost. I have found this to be absolutely true, with the caveat that everyone needs Energy Gates and a smaller proportion also needs other sets of neigong, qigong or the Tai Chi form. The success of the other practices is built on the foundation of Energy Gates. This is because Energy Gates teaches people the fundamental alignment, balance and energy flow principles of the internal arts in a significantly simpler movement than a whole Tai Chi form, making it much easier for them to learn the most important principle of not doing too much.

How we teach

How we teach is as important as what we teach. The Water Method, with its focus on releasing blockages, truly shines in the teaching of Tai Chi to chronic pain patients. Here less is most definitely more. Over the years we have cut down radically on the amount that we teach. At first we taught a Tai Chi form beginning to end; initially the Cheng Man Ching Short Form, then the B.K. Frantzis's Wu Style Short Form, which proved to be particularly good for all forms of back and joint pain. We then reduced it to just the Grasp Bird's Tail section of the form. Now our main form is Energy Gates Cloud Hands, usually broken down into its components.

With each step that we have taken, softening both the way and the amount that we teach, we have seen a concomitant increase in the proportion of patients who stay in the Tai Chi for Chronic Pain programme. We have also seen an increase in the severity of the chronic pain with which we have been able to help people cope.

We repeatedly emphasise to the patients that they stay within their comfortable range, which usually means the range of movement where they feel no increase in pain. In this group that

¹ For more information see, Frantzis, B.K., *Opening the Energy Gates of Your Body*, 2nd edition (Berkeley: Blue Snake Books, 2006).

² *Opening the Energy Gates of Your Body*, 2nd edition, pp.217-18.

³ For which see chapter 5 of *Opening the Energy Gates of Your Body*, 2nd edition.

range is often frustratingly small for them. It is quite a challenge to convince them of the benefits of exercising within such a tiny range of movement.

This principle of staying within the mean, which master Frantzis calls the 70% rule, is the hardest and most important thing for our chronic pain patients to learn. It is the only way that they can begin to let go of their tension, which is vital to their progress. I have not met a chronic pain patient who was relaxed and who did not try to push through their pain. These habits die hard.

The counter-cultural nature of the Water Method quickly becomes clear with this type of teaching. We are saturated by a 'no pain, no gain,' 'you must try harder' culture. I am regularly looked at by patients as if I am quite mad when I suggest that they consider not pushing against their limits. It has never occurred to them that their pushing is a major factor in their condition.

My first piece of advice to any prospective teacher of Tai Chi for chronic pain is that whatever you teach, you want to go so slowly and gently that you begin to think that what you are teaching cannot possibly be doing any good and that the students must be getting bored. Once you get to that stage you will probably still be teaching too much, but it will be heading in the right direction.

This approach does require trust in the material and principles that you are teaching. Energy Gates rewards that trust. You learn a great deal about the efficacy of these exercises when you teach them to people with very damaged bodies.

We have found that focusing on releasing the nervous system is much more effective for chronic pain sufferers than stretching muscle. Everyone that we see has lost the natural space inside their body. Muscle tensing and stretching exercises do not address this problem and often will exacerbate it. It is through releasing the nervous system and regaining natural body alignments that our patients recover this internal space and, consequently, are able to let go of their pain.

Regular breaks are also very important in our classes. Our patients' comfortable duration of any exercise is usually less than five minutes; often much less.

The emotional side

There is a significant emotional component to chronic pain. Not doing too much is equally important in this regard. If someone does too much they can quickly become overwhelmed as the emotions that are bound up with their pain begin to release.

We encourage the patients to chat while resting. As well as a time to relax and absorb what they have done, it is a great opportunity for them to interact and make friends. Chronic pain is isolating. The social side of the Tai Chi classes is very important in giving them a way back into the community. Its value cannot be overestimated.

Pain creates fear and a sense of powerlessness by its very nature. These classes give sufferers a

sense of doing something to help themselves. Tai Chi equips them with a set of tools that they can use whenever they need them. This has an immensely positive effect on their self confidence.

It is worth pointing out that this is a slow process. We work in cycles of twenty weeks. The question of whether Tai Chi will help a certain person is primarily a question of whether that person is willing or able to take on board the radically different way that we offer of engaging with their body, emotions and mental attitudes. Everyone who can make that change benefits.

Our message is fairly simple: let your body open up, gently and slowly, by doing these exercises within your comfortable range. Learning to do it takes time and patience.

Acknowledgements

The Tai Chi for Chronic Pain Service is the legacy of my late mentor and friend Brian Cookman. Without his compassionate leadership we would not be doing this work.

I teach with my long term students Dave Willis and Gary Short. Only through their hard work and commitment are we able to reach the hundreds of people each year who are benefiting from this service.

I offer my sincere thanks to Lineage Master Bruce Frantzis, for so generously sharing these profound healing practices. His teaching has made all the difference. It has transformed every aspect of what we do.

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