

Learning Tai Chi in Town of Porter

By *Tristan McGough*
Special to the Reporter

Learning the Beijing 24 Form of Tai Chi at the Porter Town Hall will take you across a universal style that—should you travel—you can step into with a similar group anywhere around the world, and you’d be in perfect sync.

On Feb. 29, 2020, from 9 to 11:30 a.m., I was afforded the opportunity to experience Leap Year with a few new moves that got my Chi moving and expressed “serenity in activity.”

Instructor Ray Gates stated, “We’re in our third term here, and I’m happy to share this standardized form with the group, though I had originally been asked to help the group with what they’d learned from a previous teacher.”

A pretty steady group of students have been practicing Tai Chi for the better part of six years, and for around four of those years, they were without a teacher after she’d left for other parts of the country.

The youngest member of the learning group, Amber Glass, disclosed, “We went to one of Ray’s “Come and Try it Days” at Frame Park in Waukesha, about two years ago on Tai Chi Day.”

Another apprentice of this centuries old martial art form, Lisa Imhoff, piggybacked, “We wanted to find someone who could help us continue our Yang-style 37 Posture Form that we’d learned from our former teacher, Emily Smith, who had her Grasshopper Healing Arts studio in Edgerton before she moved to Tampa, where she’s teaching now.”

Lisa and Amber recall traveling to Waukesha, participating in the practice session, and asking Gates if he’d take up where Smith had left the group, which had regularly gotten together to rehearse their Solo postures and forms together after Smith’s departure.

“I agreed,” Gates stated, “to help them with their Yang-style Form. We later decided that we’d go on to form a class where I’d teach them the Beijing 24 Forms of Tai Chi.”

Gates teaches a number of Tai Chi and Qigong forms, first becoming a student in 2001 of Master Dennis Watts, who is an internationally recognized, certified and accredited Master of Tai Chi

and based in Queensland, Australia. In 2014 Gates was certified by Master Watts as an Instructor and in 2015 Gates established the Wisconsin Tai Chi Academy in Waukesha, Wis., to where he’d moved and presently works as a physical therapist at the Elmbrook Campus of Ascension SE Wisconsin Hospital in Brookfield.

“I usually give,” Gates continued, “several of these no payment, open to the public ‘Come and Try It Days’ during the spring and summer months so people get a chance to experience for themselves the benefits of Tai Chi.”

Long recognized as a low-impact, health and wellness exercise program that’s become a modern component of Complementary Medicine, Tai Chi promotes mind-body integration and has been scientifically proven to supplement traditional Western medical treatments and help prevent a wide range of illnesses.

Among the many benefits evidenced by engaging in Tai Chi practice are improvements for all types of stress-related illnesses, mental health issues, including depression and anxiety, heart and blood pressure problems, arthritis, rheumatism, bronchitis, asthma, hypertension, diabetes, low immunity, and the musculoskeletal system.

Porter’s practicing proponents list their own personally derived benefits.

One of Gates’ pupils, Dale Lucht, has been practicing Tai Chi for several years, and had been an active Taekwondo Martial Arts practitioner before having to undergo debilitating treatments and surgeries for bladder cancer. He made the transition to Tai Chi in part because of its emphasis on relaxed movements that are slow, continuous, gentle and meant to remove blockages in the body while energizing every system: cerebral-neural, pulmonary, circulatory, digestive, endocrine, lymphatic and musculoskeletal.

“Among other things, my balance is better,” Lucht humbly affirms, having recently had a tumor removed yet being emboldened to attend Saturday morning’s two-and-a-half hour session.

Glass interjected, “I’ve got to say that the rest of us can see that your range of motion and flexibility have increased over the years, Dale. I’m especially thinking of when you started years ago and how far you’ve come since then.”

Standing in a circle after class, the others nodded their heads in agreement.

Imhoff shares, “I think it’s fun to do, and for my part, I feel more energetic and overall more healthy.

“Also, I enjoy the group spirit and the social aspect.”

Glass agreed, “The social part is great! I’ve gained six new friends and six new mentors who’ve given me insights into life I’d otherwise not have gotten.”

She expanded on what Tai Chi training has brought into her own life. “I really feel myself getting emotional when I talk about this because it’s changed my life, especially my outlook and wellbeing. “Tai Chi stresses peace of mind, stillness in motion, and moving forward but in a relaxed way. Equanimity is the word. I want that evenness of temper and sense of calm throughout my life, in all circumstances.”

Garth Fisher emphasized how his daily practice of Tai Chi has made him more flexible and active. “I’ll be 80 years old come April, and I’ve increased my fortitude. It’s also helped with healing, helping my body recover and feeling more resistant.”

Gates insists that whatever Tai Chi form one employs, it will promote advantages that translate into personal betterment across a wide health spectrum, and being a physical therapist by trade, he’s in a frontline position to know.

However, he recommends that beginners start with Form 24.

“The Beijing 24 is really a standardized style that incorporates all the original Thirteen Postures and can be used as a platform that one can use to advance to any other Tai Chi style.”



The Porter Tai Chi class from L to R - Mary Viney, Dale Lucht, Instructor Ray Gates, Amber Glass, Lisa Imhoff and Garth Fisher.

Photo by *Tristan McGough*

Amber takes up that thread with a smile, “We’re hoping to convince Ray to teach us the Tai Chi Sword Form after we’ve learned the Beijing 24 Form.”

Though that may be a way off, Gates returns the smile but makes no promises, underscoring the present need to diligently practice the 24 forms he’s now teaching the enthusiastic class at Porter.

“Once we’ve mastered all 24 forms,” he inveigles his students’ further interest, “we’ll see where we want to go from there.”

Nonetheless, wherever these Tai Chi students are headed, it’s along a time-honored path of serene, adept activity that rewards it’s practitioners with enhanced mental, emotional and physical wellness.

More information on the Wisconsin Tai Chi Academy can be found on their website or by going to one of their three social media sites: Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Those wanting to join the Porter band of Tai Chi acolytes can contact Instructor Gates directly at rayg@wisconsintaichiacademy.com, or phone or text him at 262-288-0099.

“I’m always open to new students coming into our class and getting them up to speed with the rest of the class, but at their own pace.”



An accredited Level 1 Tai Chi Instructor, by profession Ray Gates is a physical therapist.

Photo by *Tristan McGough*

A look at Tai Chi concepts and principles

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Though Tai Chi has been around for many centuries, and its history is somewhat shrouded in competing legends, there are five major recognized styles of Tai Chi with innumerable sub-styles and schools.

In 1956 the Chinese Sports Committee brought together four renowned Tai Chi teachers to create a simplified form of 24 movements as exercise for the masses and a standardized basis for learning more complex forms, some of these having as many as 88 to 108 postures. The creators of the new style, eventually dubbed Beijing 24 Forms Tai Chi, takes about six minutes to perform when mastered, and was designed to give the beginner an introduction to the essential elements yet retain the traditional flavor of longer hand forms with their numerous stances.

This 24 Form in its brevity and mass appeal derives from the well-known Chinese martial art, Tai Chi Ch’aun, which means “the Grand Ultimate Fist” and dates back at least six centuries.

Based on the metaphysical interdependence and complementarity of Yin (feminine cosmic energy) and Yang (male cosmic energy), and their abiding union throughout the universe as the Great Tao, Tai Chi incorporates activity-based “forms” or patterns that align body and mind.

Two essential concepts are dominant in Tai Chi, “Shen” (Spirit/Mind) and “Chi” (Energy/Bioelectric Currents), which moves throughout the body, being akin to the Hindu concept of Prana and its bodily channels (Nadis), of which there are 72,000 coursing throughout the human organism.

Beginning the “Ten Important Principles” of Yang Cheng-Fu (1882-1936), the first states,

“Suspend from the crown,” elaborating, “Focusing the spirit, firmness within softness. The light (Shen) and sensitive energy (Chi) will naturally and effortlessly meet at the top of the head.”

As “energy follows thought,” the Tai Chi practitioner learns to focus thinking and direct the energy in motion. The body will follow like a horse led by its rider, that is, the concerted mind.

Cheng-Fu’s eighth principal is “Coordinate you internal and external movements. The spirit is the master and the body is its servant. The nature of all movements consists of softness and hardness, expansion and contraction. Expansion includes the body, mind, and will. The same is true of contraction. When you unify internal and external movements, your body moves as one without interruption.”

One sees the unifying Tao at work here on the personal level, blending the complementary energies of Yin and Yang in an intelligent and disciplined way

through will and mind, not force or strenuous effort.

“There must be absolute continuity in your movements,” instructs Cheng-Fu under point nine. “There should be no clumsy breaks in movements, rather the Chi should be slowly trained to be continuous, circular, and unending. Flow like a river.”

Another Chinese system of integrated Taoist philosophy and down-to-earth practice is the 3,000 year old practice of Qigong, which is literally translated as “energy work.” This system’s primary aim is to control the movement of Chi, the life-force, internally, using only the mind to direct energy throughout the body. Though physical movements can be used, they are not required in this ancient set of techniques.

Notwithstanding, the practice of Tai Chi aims at producing the same state of tranquility in body and mind that Qigong seeks to achieve. In Cheng-Fu’s principles, his tenth one clarifies, “Seek serenity in activity,

To practice the forms concentrating on the internal power without disrupting our calmness, elevating our pulse dangerously or losing our breath.”

In both practical systems, the harmonizing of polar energies leads to a unified state of serenity in the here-and-now for the practitioner.

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