

Towards an Explanation of Intuition in Tai Chi Practice

Abstract

This paper will discuss a potential link between the practice of an internal martial art called Tai Chi and the experience of intuitive insight. It will explore potential physiological causation for this change in consciousness in order to provide a basis for further study.

Introduction

Lived experience suggests that practicing Tai Chi over time can open a pathway towards accessing a state of consciousness that may be interpreted as intuition. This **hypothesis** is informed by over thirty years of personal experience teaching Tai Chi, the works of the CG Jung and based around a framework suggested by somatic practitioner Suzanne Scurlock.

Interpreting traditional Tai Chi teaching from a somatic body awareness perspective requires us to pay attention to inner body physical sensations and feelings. Today I teach this somatic interoceptive approach as Embodied Tai Chi. This incorporates five principles of practice; stability, intention, breathe work, attention and connectivity. This form of practice can lead us to very nebulous experiences. Nebulous because our internal experiences can be interpreted in different ways; as a sense of contentment, calm or feeling in awe of the natural world. These vague experiences suggest a subjective change in consciousness and as such present challenges when defining or validating this outcome of Tai Chi practice through academic study.

From an Eastern philosophical viewpoint mind and body are seen as interacting mutually dependent opposites rather than being separate independent entities. This interaction is visually represented by the yin – yang symbol. C G Jung explored many Eastern perspectives during his study of the conscious and unconscious mind. He recognised the challenges posed when interpreting Eastern practices with a Western cultural mindset.

It could be said that Western culture has predominantly focused on mind and has limited language to express inner physical sensations and feelings. The little language in common use such as having a 'gut feeling' or a 'broken heart' it is often devalued in relation to logical thought.

The aim here is to present an interpretation of how Tai Chi traditional practice is related to our physiology and how in turn this can inform our understanding of previously undervalued 'emotional' human experience. In doing so I will draw on a framework suggested by Suzanne Scurlock that leads me to suggest a definition of somatic intuitive decision making as;

'Non thinking inspiration, analysis and evaluation through body vitality and stability'

Specifically a somatic approach to traditional Tai Chi can be interpreted using Scurlock's five areas of the body awareness; heart, gut, pelvis, feet – legs, and bones.

Inspiration

Scurlock suggests the heart is related to inspiration, how we connect with people through compassion. That the back of the heart relates to compassion for our self.

Traditional Tai Chi teaching refers to open and closing spiralling movement called Chan Ssu Chin or Silk Reeling. Movements are also associated with yin contracting or yang expanding intention. Microcosmic circulation breathing also involves areas in front and behind the heart. Embodied Tai Chi practice involves feeling the sensation of relaxing and opening the chest in order to completely relax the abdomen. This is linked to 'connecting' the whole body in movement through the shoulder blades and includes feeling the sensation of rounding the back. Both the chest and the point between our shoulder blades relate to the physical area to the front and back of the heart. At the same time the martial movement must at all times be conducted with compassion; action with the absence of fear, anger or cold numbness. The front of the heart must be compassionate when expanding movement out into the external world and the back of the heart compassionate towards the self when undertaking a matching contracting movement. The physical heart has the second highest number of neurons after the brain. Paying attention to the shoulder blades and chest rather than the physical heart every time we practice Tai Chi may improve our sensitivity, our awareness of this area of the body. This change of conscious awareness may provide opportunities to experience intuitive inspiration.

Analysis

Scurlock suggests the gut is associated with warnings and danger, having a 'gut feeling' about something.

Traditional Tai Chi and Qigong see the abdominal area known as the 'Tantien' or 'Dantian' as important in practice. Other Eastern arts like yoga refer to this area of the body as the 'Hara'.

Embodied Tai Chi practice involves physical posture and breathing techniques that pay attention to the abdomen, paying attention to how it feels and its sensations. I have suggested that both posture and breathing techniques activate our parasympathetic nervous system helping us to remain calm. The gut has the highest number of neurons after the brain. Being more sensitive to change in sensation or feeling in our abdominal area may enable us to become more aware of unconscious warning signals or an unease about something, an intuitive analysis of any given situation.

Evaluation

Scurlock suggests the legs and feet are associated with process or problem solving. She cites the common experience of finding the answer to a problem while going for a walk.

Scurlock suggests there is an association between walking and its cross lateral function, using both sides of the body requiring activation by both sides of the brain.

Traditional Tai Chi teaching warns against being double weighted by ensuring each posture has a full and empty leg. The active arm is always the diagonal opposite of the active leg. Embodied Tai Chi practice involves paying attention to the sensation in alternate leg and opposite hand and arm. This mindful movement experienced in the practice of Embodied Tai

Chi can be a powerful way of developing greater balance between both our logical and artistic sides of the brain. We allow a balanced intuitive evaluation of any given subject to unfold.

Vitality

Scurlock suggests the pelvis is associated with our personal energy asking are we just limping along or have we the get up and go to complete a task.

Traditional Tai Chi teaching teaches students to relax the waist and not lock the knees. It is important to relax the muscles in the crease of the thigh, the 'Kua'.

Embodied Tai Chi practice teaches students to find a bouncy springy sensation or feeling in the legs. This sensation helps us to locate the sensitive muscles used for balance rather than the more powerful muscles used in but gross movement. This somatic practice also involves the psoas muscles that connect our lower back through the pelvis to our legs. This relaxed bouncy springy sensation supports the flowing light movement associated with Tai Chi, movement indicative of a natural vitality. A state of physical openness and flexing without tension that allows intuition to unfold.

Stability

Scurlock points to the importance of paying attention to the bones in order to be steady, find clarity.

Traditional Tai Chi teaching has much to do with physical stability all be it predominantly focused on a martial application. The circular spiralling movements referred to as Chan Ssu Chin practiced in Tai Chi and Pa Qua are also reputed to strengthen bones.

Embodied Tai Chi teaches students to pay attention to the inner physical sensations of our muscles, tendons and fascia. On a physiological level this happens as a result of neurons sending signals to the brain, it's the process of balance or proprioception. We therefore sense our bones through their connection with muscles, tendons and fascia. This connection can be compared with the concept of tensegrity; a structural system that can be found in a bridge made up from solid stable parts joined together with flexing or bracing cables. When we pay attention to this 'connectivity' throughout our body we not only become physically balanced but we have an 'feeling' of being stable. Physical stability therefore acts on our emotional stability. We learn stability or our tensegrity at around one year of age when we first start to walk. From that point on stability becomes part of our autonomic nervous system, we do it without direct thought. When practicing Embodied Tai Chi we play with our balance becoming aware of that intuitive stability. We develop a state of physical and emotional stability that allows intuition to unfold.

Brain

Scurlock views the brain as the sixth part of the body involved in somatic self understanding. The brain brings information from the other five parts of the body.

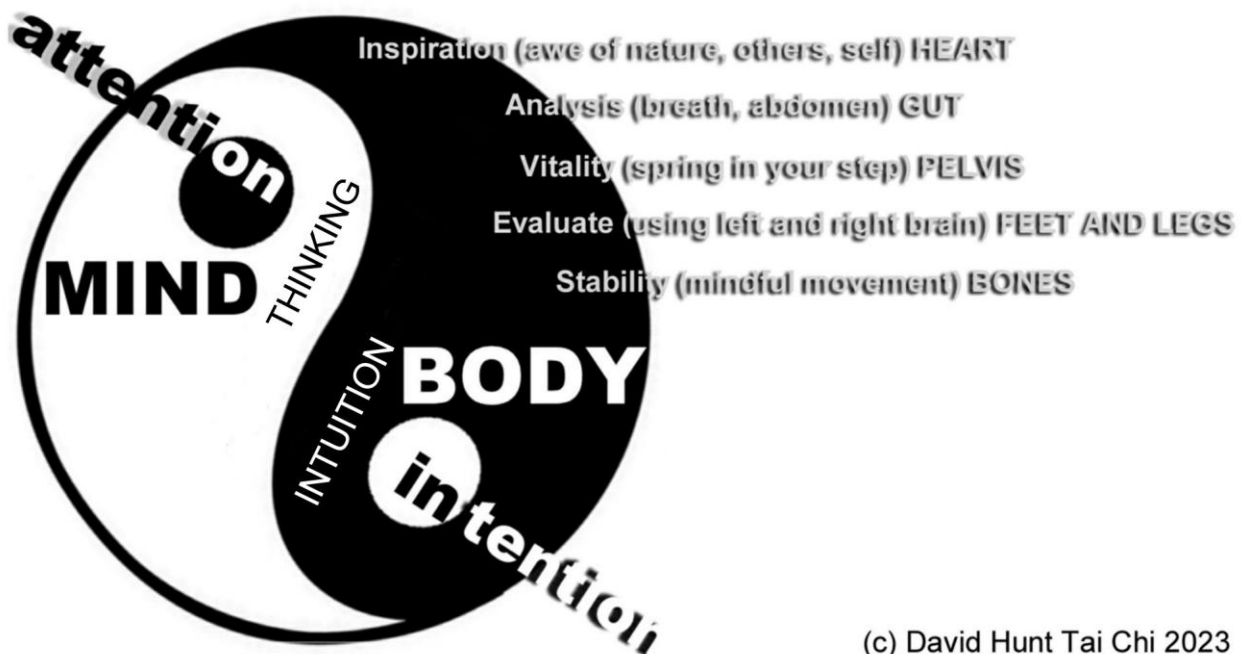
Embodied Tai Chi practice involves the brain in two ways. Firstly we have to move with intention, to be calm without tension. Secondly our brain has to be open to listen and value the sensations and feelings from the rest of the body. Intention and attention are two of the principles of Embodied Tai Chi, along with stability, breath and connection.

Traditional Tai Chi holds 'Yi' or mind as a key principle. All action involves from intention – movement – breath.

The posture and breathing inherent in Tai Chi practice may enable us to activate our calming parasympathetic nervous system while at the same time paying attention to our inner physical sensations and feelings. This state of consciousness may result in moments of unsought intuition in the form of finding a fresh approach, the answer to a problem, placing something in perspective, finding untapped energy or strength of purpose.

When we first learn Tai Chi these thoughts of 'things to do' fill our head (the chatter of a monkey mind) causing tension preventing us from being aware of our physical self. Here it is important to separate unsought intuition from everyday worries that fill our head preventing us from being calm in order to practice the Tai Chi movements. Intuition unfolds from that indistinct place beyond the thinking brain by having the intention to pay attention to our inner physical self. You can't make intuition happen but you can learn ways to be physically open and calm allowing it to gently unfold to you. The mindful movement of Tai Chi is one way to find that open calm place, one found the same methods can be used in a simple nature walk.

By allowing our body to unfold to us a moment of intuition the mind - brain can come to a hypothesis that in turn can be questioned, replicated and tested. A thing of the body becomes a thing of the mind. Creativity - innovation can then be seen from that Eastern philosophical perspective, as a continuous interaction between two opposites, mind and body.



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Conclusion

This paper has discussed the possible links between the practice of Tai Chi and the human state of consciousness we call intuitive insight . It has offered potential explanation for how

this may occur from a physiological perspective based on the practice of Embodied Tai Chi providing a structure for academic study and evaluation.

The views expressed here are entirely my own. I am indebted to Douglas Ashby for his wisdom, Graham Horwood for his Jungian perspective of Tai Chi and the Shift Network for their inspirational webinar with Suzanne Scurlock.

#David Hunt Tai Chi, #Tai Chi Walks, #Awe Tai Chi, #Embodied Tai Chi

David Hunt 29th July 2023