

We wish you a Merry Christmas and a Healthy New Year!

Xiu Lian : Self Cultivation

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“To gain everlasting benefits from Tai Chi, you must delve deeply into tranquillity. It must become your way of life.” (Grandmaster Feng Zhi Qiang, founder of the Hun Yuan Tai Chi system)

To learn is to live and grow. To stop learning is to stagnate. Learning needs to be both extrinsic as well as intrinsic. We all know the importance of study and learning. As soon as we start school, we are taught many subjects. Then at university, we usually specialise in a few areas of study and aim to be thorough in our knowledge. **We are not taught how to know ourselves more deeply.** This is usually the domain of spiritual study and tends to be something you need to seek for yourself. In the old Chinese culture, the term, xiu lian, was used to denote a form of spiritual cultivation or journey.

Practising Qigong, Tai Chi or Wu Dao Gong has the ability to purify our energy and uplift our spirit. This is the essence of xiu lian. The process begins with a willingness from the student to improve his health and well being. Once you begin training, you soon notice that you are not as strong, relaxed or peaceful as you could be. When you learn the relaxation exercises, you discover just how busy the mind is. As the masters say, “An undisciplined mind is like a wild elephant.” It will take a skilful trainer to calm it down and eventually teach it to be a faithful servant.



Once you start to move, you realise just how stiff and weak your body is. You might also discover other health issues just beneath the surface. The combination of all these health issues can lead to an overall feeling of stress and unhappiness. In the language of Qigong, they say that our energy is weak and blocked. This creates **an imbalance which leads to dis-ease.** The first step then is to purify and release the blockages. The word, purify, conjures up many different images and thoughts. It is a loaded term and needs to be explained further so that we can understand what it means in the Qigong vocabulary.

Stagnant water can become dirty and unsuitable for drinking purposes. **Blood and qi (energy) are also subject to stagnation.** Pollution affects the air we breathe, causing it to be harmful or poisonous for our bodies. Negative or destructive thoughts and emotions can also affect how our bodies function. So purification is embedded in the training process. The mind and body are harnessed to gradually align us with the more benevolent forces of nature. Relaxation, calmness and tranquillity are some of these qualities. They form an integral part of the practices and help to rebalance the mind and body.

The more we practise, the more we feel. A seasoned practitioner can feel which foods are beneficial, how the weather affects the body, how certain places awaken strength and how others engender weakness. As we continue on our journey, we also know those people we should be aligned with and respectfully maintain a safe distance from those who might cause us harm. **The highest level of purification is on the level of the mind, that is, watching our thinking, paying attention**

to what we say to ourselves and to others. Guarding the mind is a powerful skill to cultivate and as the wise Buddha said, “Your worst enemy can't harm you as much as your own thoughts unguarded. But once mastered, no one can help you as much.”

Training Awareness

At times, we do not see how our thoughts, speech and actions lead to certain outcomes. Harmful speech and actions will create a backlash. If we are not aware of how our speech and actions affect others, we will have many enemies. Whereas, if we are mindful of our speech and actions, we will cultivate good relationships and gain the support of others. **At the same time, we are developing our patience and understanding, and showing gratitude and respect to others and ourselves.** Developing self awareness is very much part of xiu lian. The more we practise, the more we understand the subtle and sometimes the not-so-subtle connections among our thoughts, words, actions and the world around us. Harmful actions towards others can be due to many factors. Usually, it is how we feel about ourselves that can lead to strong negative actions towards others. Through training in xiu lian, we will see more clearly our thought patterns and how they can contribute to negative speech and actions.



At first, we do not see the connections. We feel what we think and do is okay. However, through the practice, we may begin to feel repulsed by certain thoughts and actions. Gradually, we naturally want to behave in a more respectful and tolerant manner, not only for others but also for ourselves. **Ultimately, behaving in a more mindful way creates a feeling of well being and contentment which is its own reward, not to mention how much better others will feel about you.**

In the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu states that **virtue is the highest principle of the Tao.** The practice of the Chinese internal health and martial arts is based on this principle. Through your training, you will gradually embody this principle and reap the many rewards of living this way. Self awareness is the key. If you cannot feel your body, you cannot change it. Feeling is connected with awareness. It is our feedback system through which the body communicates with the mind. In Qigong, Tai Chi and Wu Dao Gong, there are many methods to help us balance, integrate and improve the mind-body connection, bringing us better health, peace and harmony and leading to greater happiness and contentment.



The deeper we can enter into the realm of quiet and tranquillity, the greater we benefit from our practice. Over time, you learn to make the choices in life that are in accordance with your own understanding and experience from the training. This may be living a more spiritually orientated life. It is not something you should impose upon yourself. It will be a natural evolution and elevation of your life. So the deeper you go in your training, the more you receive in return and the happier you become. Enjoy the journey!

– Chief Instructor Brett Wagland