

A Personal Reflection on the Relationship Between Tai Chi Qigong and Mindfulness Meditation

By Lisa Topping, October 2009

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to contemplate the similarities and differences between Tai Chi Qigong (TCQ) and Mindfulness Meditation (MM).

I am currently undertaking teacher training programmes in both these modalities (with the Institute of Integral Qigong and Tai Chi [IIQTC] and the Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice [CMRP] at Bangor University, respectively), and it is not unusual for people to ask me how these two disciplines relate to one another. It is easy to respond to this question in general terms by explaining that they are both forms of meditation which aim to develop the practitioner's awareness of the present moment. However, until now, I have not really considered the relationship between the two practices in much more detail than this, choosing instead to wear either my "tai chi hat" or my "mindfulness hat". Indeed, the literature indicates that I am not the only one to treat the practices as separate entities. In all the TCQ literature I have perused, references to MM are very few and far between, whilst in the MM literature only occasional, cursory statements about TCQ are found. For example, when searching PubMed, only one research paper could be found which specifically evaluates both these modalities together (Posadski and Jacques, 2009), a paper which I personally consider to be of rather dubious quality.

Specifically, this paper focuses on the relationship between TCQ and training programmes referred to as Mindfulness-Based Approaches (MBAs). After briefly outlining the origin of these practices, I attempt to compare and contrast them. It should be emphasised however that this is just a personal reflection, based upon my direct experiences and current understanding of the techniques. I fully expect, and indeed will welcome, changes in my perception as my practice in both arenas continues to deepen. As Confucius famously said "a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step", and this is just my first exploratory step towards understanding how these disciplines are connected.

A Bit of Background Information

Before I move on to discuss how TCQ and MBAs relate to one another, I think it is important to provide an overview of the origins of both practices.

Tai Chi Qigong – Past and Present

Qi can be translated as "breath" or "energy", whilst "gong" is translated as "work" or "cultivation". Hence qigong means breath – or energy – cultivation. It is a key part of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) which believes that illness is caused by stagnant, deficient or excessive qi, essential life energy, within the body. Qigong comprises of gentle movements, breath practices and self-massage which enable the mind and body to relax and consequently help to resolve imbalances and blockages in the flow of qi. This prevents and/or cures disease. There are thousands of different styles of qigong; some include movement, some are done in stillness, some standing, whilst others are performed sitting or lying down. Tai chi is one branch of qigong which normally involves a sequence of moves which are typically performed standing up, and can be likened to a slow, graceful dance. In

this paper, for the sake of simplicity, I will just refer to the generic term of Tai Chi Qigong (TCQ) which encompasses all these varieties.

TCQ has been practiced for 2000 years, perhaps longer. It is difficult to determine its precise origins but probably the earliest qigong-like exercises were performed by ancient Chinese shamans. Indian yoga, Buddhism and Confucianism are all believed to have had influences on the development of TCQ, but it is understood that Daoism, China's original spiritual tradition, played a key role in the history. Ancient Daoists were essentially scientists/philosophers whose observations of the natural world led them to believe that living a balanced life in harmony with nature, was essential for health and vitality. They developed exercises which mimicked aspects of nature as a way of cultivating life energy, perhaps incorporating earlier shamanic movements and postures too. It is also understood that it was these ancient Daoist masters who first discovered how qi interacts within the human body, identifying storage centres (the dantians), energy meridians and acupuncture points, information that remains key to TCM today, and which Western science and medicine has only recently started to embrace. An amazing discovery in such ancient times!

Originally these exercises were called dao-yin (which translates as "guiding the qi and extending the limbs"). Evidence of the age of these techniques comes from the Dao-yin Tu, a piece of silk excavated from a Han Dynasty (220 B.C. – 220 A.D.) tomb which clearly depicts qigong-like movements which are still practiced today. It was not until the 20th century that the term "qigong" was coined.

TCQ techniques have been passed down through the generations in China, and apart from a temporary blip during the Cultural Revolution, have formed an important part of the modern Chinese healthcare system. Recently, the practices have started to become more widespread in the Western world too, as people begin to understand the importance of self-care. By distilling the principles of these ancient oriental techniques into forms which can easily be practiced by people of all ages, physical abilities and creeds, organisations such as the Institute of Integral Qigong and Tai Chi are working to make these powerful self-healing techniques even more accessible.

Mindfulness – Past and Present

Mindfulness Meditation (also known as vipassana or insight meditation) originated 2500 years ago as a fundamental part of the Eastern spiritual tradition of Buddhism. Buddhist principles are too numerous to describe here, but perhaps the most concise way to explain the teachings of the Buddha is that "he taught one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering" (Goldstein, 1993, p.5). Suffering, in this context, is often equated with having a protracted sense of dissatisfaction with life, rather than anything more extreme. One important element of this is the recognition of how the human mind habitually judges experiences as either good, bad or neutral. In particular the tendency to unconsciously react to experiences with either greed (wanting more of the things they perceive to be good) or aversion (rejecting things they perceive to be bad), means that people spend a lot of time and effort trying to make their current experience different to how it is. Learning to become more aware of what is actually happening, and opening and inquiring into each experience, whatever it is, in a non-judgemental way, is a key part of mindfulness practice which can help to alleviate this sense of suffering or dissatisfaction.

These ancient Buddhist teachings were first distilled into a secularised MBA training programme by Jon Kabat-Zinn 30 years ago. This programme was named Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and was created with the intention of making mindfulness meditation accessible and relevant to patients with a variety of chronic conditions, such as

pain and stress. In the 1990s Zindel Segal, Mark Williams and John Teasdale modified the MBSR programme by including aspects of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. The resulting Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) programme was targeted towards people in remission from depression, to reduce the risk of depressive relapse. Since their development MBSR and MBCT have both been used in an expanded range of settings to help a wider variety of people.

Both MBSR and MBCT are 8-week group-based programmes which engage participants in a variety of meditation practices, including body scans, sitting meditation and mindful movement. A detailed explanation of the MBSR and MBCT programmes is provided by Kabat-Zinn (2004a) and Segal et al (2002) respectively and will not be covered in this paper. Instead, I focus on comparing the core elements of these MBAs with TCQ.

A Reflection on the Similarities between TCQ and MBAs

Two key similarities between these practices have of course already been highlighted. Namely, TCQ and MBAs are both:

- Ancient practices, with a history spanning thousands of years, which have their roots firmly in the Eastern spiritual philosophies of Daoism and Buddhism respectively.
- Forms of meditation which aim to develop the practitioner's awareness of the present moment.

I will now discuss other ways in which the practices appear to correlate closely with one another. It should be noted that these observations are listed in no particular order, and that the exploratory nature of this paper means whilst some points are fairly explicit, others are somewhat more nebulous. It should also be mentioned that this list is probably not exhaustive. No doubt there are other likenesses which I have not yet realized, for if there is one certainty in this exploration, it is that additional layers of understanding will continue to reveal themselves over time.

Learning from Experience

I think it is important to emphasise at the start of this analysis, that the fundamental qualities of both TCQ and MBAs cannot be fully appreciated without directly experiencing the practice. Theory and intellectual knowledge can contribute to a person's understanding of these modalities, but they are both essentially experiential in nature. Indeed, trying too hard to grasp and define the core principles of these techniques at an intellectual level can sometimes hinder understanding, rather than promote it I have found. For someone such as myself who has been educated throughout life primarily via facts and theory, this "other way" of learning can seem strange to begin with, and there remains a tendency to want to be able to define and conceptualise what you are learning in black and white terms. Discovering and permitting yourself to open up to this "deeper kind of knowing", which does not rely on labels and intellectual concepts, is an elemental part of both TCQ and MBAs. It must be recognised however that this aspect of the practices makes writing an analytical paper such as this quite challenging. How to describe that which can't be fully be put into words?!

Teaching from Experience

It is also true to say that both these disciplines can only be properly taught by individuals who have a regular personal practice, as the most valuable teaching and guidance comes directly from personal experiences rather than a textbook. In both fields the teacher

primarily provides instruction on the relevant techniques and tools, together with guidance and encouragement. As alluded to above, the student cannot learn by just attending instructional sessions however; it is only by directly exploring and experiencing the techniques themselves that the student can gain true understanding and obtain benefits.

The Importance of Posture

Posture is important in both practices. Whether standing or sitting the practitioner is encouraged to gently lengthen their spine by lifting the crown of the head. This opens up their chest and abdomen which can promote more efficient physiological functioning, and also encourages an embodiment of relaxed alertness, self-confidence and self-acceptance. It should be noted that additional minor adjustments to posture are made in TCQ which are not included in MBAs, but the purposeful alignment of the body is essentially the same in both disciplines.

Understanding Body and Mind

At the core of both practices is the understanding that the mind and the body are connected and influence one another. For example if the mind is agitated it is likely that the body is restless too, whilst a relaxed body can help to calm the mind. To someone with experience of either of these practices this connection seems obvious. Within the population at large however this connection is frequently ignored, or even denied, which can be extremely detrimental to health and wellbeing.

It is widely recognised that individuals in the modern Western world spend most of their time being “caught up in their heads” and consequently pay little attention to signals that their body may be sending to them. This means that important warning signals regarding the onset of stress and disease tend to remain buried beneath a sea of mental busyness and constant doing. As a consequence people allow their health and wellbeing to deteriorate, until the symptoms become more severe and can no longer be ignored. By the time this happens more serious, costly medical intervention is often then required to “fix” the problem that could possibly have been nipped in the bud had the individual paid more attention to their body.

Both TCQ and MBAs place a lot of emphasis on awareness of the body. Practitioners are encouraged to drop their consciousness down, away from their head, into their body, and to explore the signals and sensations they find there. This provides three clear benefits:

- It facilitates present moment awareness as the body can't be in the past or the future....it can only be felt now!
- Practitioners can better honour what their body needs to stay fit and healthy.
- People can develop a “felt-sense” of their situation, picking up intuitive signals they would previously have missed. This can help them to respond to life's challenges in more astute and creative ways.

Both practices also teach people to be more aware of their thoughts and emotions, in addition to their body, although there is more emphasis of this in MBAs than TCQ. By learning to openly observe how their present moment experience is constantly changing, practitioners come to realise that all thoughts, body sensations and emotions are actually just passing, temporary events rather than solid, permanent reflections of who they are (i.e. “the self”). Such ability to “decentre from experience” (Segal et al, 2002) provides significant help in dealing with both physical pain and negative thoughts, as people start to understand that “they are not their pain” and that just because they think something it is not necessarily

true. Indeed, enabling participants to gain direct experiential awareness and understanding that “thoughts are not facts” is a major element of MBAs that helps to prevent practitioners getting tangled up in the content of their mind.

This aspect of my MBA practice has very much helped to support my TCQ. Like many people I have often felt tormented by a mind that refuses to shut up during my TCQ practice! Understanding that random thought generation is just what all minds do, rather than being a personal fault, I have been able to be much more accepting of it. Rather than fighting my busy, wandering mind (which just makes it even more active as lots of self-critical thoughts add to the noise!), this acceptance of the fact that there will always be thoughts playing in my mind to at least some degree, means that I can pay them much less attention. It’s a bit like turning down the volume of the radio: there’s still mental noise, but I can choose not to listen to it in detail....at least some of the time. This facilitates enhanced levels of relaxation and greater focus and when I play my TCQ.

Attention, Intention and Attitude are Everything

Following on nicely from the previous section, it is important to highlight that in order to see the benefits of either practice you need to pay attention to what you are doing. Practising TCQ or MBAs whilst being caught up in thoughts and concerns is not true practice, rather it is just time spent day-dreaming and/or ruminating about problems.

Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally” (Kabat-Zinn, 2004b, p.4) and I think this is equally important in the realm of TCQ. Having the intention to remain aware of what is happening in each moment is a vital part of a practice session, whether you are engaged in TCQ or MBAs.

However, as hinted at above, the habitual, automatic tendency of the mind to become distracted with thoughts of the past and the future is a challenge that is encountered by practitioners of TCQ and MBAs alike. This mind wandering is triggered by the dominance of the “doing mind” which constantly scrutinises experience against a perceived sense of how things should be, and hence is generally caught up in trying to make things different from how they are, rather than accepting whatever is happening. It is recognised that this is an inevitable part of the practice, and the intention behind both modalities is to simply bring awareness back to the present moment each time the practitioner notices that they have become caught up in thoughts.

Many practitioners, especially in the early stages, can become frustrated with their lack of mind control, and hence the attitude with which the practice is approached is crucial. In the realm of MBAs Jon Kabat-Zinn emphasises the importance of adopting seven key attitudes in particular, as listed below. Many of these seem like common sense, but are actually quite hard to adhere to. Giving myself regular reminders to assume these attitudes is helping me greatly with my TCQ as well as my MBA work however.

Seven key attitudes which facilitate practice:

1. **Non-judging:** seeing experience as it is without adding interpretation or judgement.
2. **Patience:** understanding that change and understanding develops in its own time
3. **Beginners mind:** being curious about the current situation, as if you have never experienced anything like it before, rather than viewing it through a fog of preconceptions.

4. **Trust:** developing faith in the validity of your own body sensations, thoughts, emotions and intuition
5. **Non-striving:** allowing experience to be the way it is without trying to change it.
6. **Acceptance:** being open and willing to see things as they actually are in the present moment
7. **Letting go:** developing a sense of non-attachment to experience, letting thoughts and emotions arise and pass by without getting entangled in them.

An unofficial 8th attitude which is also often emphasised in MBAs is kindness to oneself, which I have found to be of great importance and help too, as it is not something that always comes naturally to me!

Sticking and Yielding

Sticking and yielding are important elements of TCQ, and MBAs practitioners also learn the importance of these principles.

I will consider sticking first of all. Both disciplines encourage the practitioner to relax into and open up to whatever arises, even if the situation is challenging, rather than to contract and shrink away from perceived difficulties. Learning to fully experience and accept the present moment as it is ("sticking with it" if you like) rather than adopting habitual avoidance strategies, allows the practitioner to see more clearly what, if anything, needs to change, and facilitates the making of wiser, more measured choices about how best to respond to the current situation.

The ability and willingness to yield to the situation when appropriate is also important however. For example, resisting unavoidable change can cause stress and tension, so sometimes the smartest choice is to bend or yield to that change, rather than fight it.

Becoming Part of Daily Life

To see the benefits of both approaches you ideally conduct a dedicated, "formal" practice session each day. However neither TCQ or MBAs are something you just practice in isolation from the rest of your daily routine. In fact it is only by integrating the practices into the fabric of daily life that significant changes and improvements in wellbeing can be achieved.

For example, MBA practitioners are encouraged to get into the habit of conducting "3 Minute Breathing Spaces" (3MBS) throughout their day, whilst TCQ players are encouraged to incorporate the 3 Intentful Corrections (3ICs) into their everyday activities. Both the 3MBS and the 3ICs provide the individual with an opportunity to check in with what is happening, on both a mind and body level, at that moment in time, and to focus on the breath for a short period. This helps them to step out of a busy, reactive "doing" mode (which seems to be the default setting for most people), into a more aware "being" mode, which helps them to view their current circumstances with a clearer, wider perspective. This in turn allows them to deal with their life experiences in a more conscious, astute way.

Difficult to Sustain Regular Practice

An unfortunate trait that both practices share is that it can be difficult to sustain regular practice. Many practitioners encounter this, and I have certainly experienced it for myself! Even though I know that if I practice my TCQ and/or MBA regularly I am a calmer, happier person it can often feel as if my mind/ego is sabotaging my attempts to do this by coming up with distractions and lists of "other things I should be doing instead".

I find this affects both my TCQ and MBA practice to some degree, although my MBA is much more susceptible to this internal sabotage. Perhaps this is because the ego is less against me developing a calm, relaxed, qi-filled body and mind (which tends to be the primary focus of my TCQ currently), and is more opposed to the exploration of mental processes (which is a feature of my MBA practice). I suspect there is definitely some “ego self-preservation” coming in to play here!

Movement and Stillness

When initially compiling this paper I put this section in the following chapter which describes key differences between TCQ and MBAs. This was due to the fact that, particularly in the earlier stages of practice, TCQ involves gentle, fluid movement whilst mindfulness meditation is generally conducted in stillness. It should be noted however that TCQ does not always involve movement, and MBAs are not always conducted in stillness. Indeed many advanced qigong practices are quiescent forms, whilst mindful movement practices are included in MBA programmes. So whilst on first inspection movement and stillness appear to be an easy way to differentiate the two modalities, there is in fact a great deal of shared ground between the two practices.

Ultimately in both practices there is a balance between movement and stillness:

- The intention during movement practice is to still the mind and focus on the present.
- During quiescent practice there is an awareness of movement (of breath, qi, thoughts etc)

This can provide an excellent antidote to 21st Century life, in which people tend suffer from both physical inactivity and mental busyness. Practising TCQ and/or MBAs can provide significant help in combating both these symptoms!

Proven Health Benefits

It is widely documented that both TCQ and MBAs can positively influence many aspects of both physical and psychological health and wellbeing. Indeed there is enough research material to write a series of papers on this topic. For now however, I am simply acknowledging this as a fact, without delving into the detail, as a summary of the shared benefits of TCQ and MBAs would not be complete without this recognition.

A Path Towards the True Self

TCQ and MBAs have the same ultimate goal: the development of spiritual insight. They just employ different tools and travel down a slightly different (although parallel) route to get to the same destination.

In the *Healing Promise of Qi*, Dr Jahnke discusses the Three Treasures, an important aspect of Chinese philosophy which provides an excellent way of describing three main levels of TCQ practice. The Three Treasures can be equated with a body→mind→spirit developmental pathway, and I believe that MBAs guide individuals through the same three levels of personal development.

In the table below I attempt to show how TCQ and MBAs mirror one another, using the Three Treasures as the framework for this analysis. I recognise that this table is not fully explicit in itself, rather it is a development of ideas presented in the *Healing Promise of Qi*, and hence Chapter 3 of this book should be referred to for additional explanation as required.

Level of practice	TCQ	MBAs
<u>Early</u> Earth Treasure = Body Focus = Yin = Jing = Caterpillar	Gentle movement Both practices initially promote awareness of the body and teach the individual how the health of the physical self can be enhanced (e.g. ability to let go of unnecessary tension; recognition of the need for more rest and/or better diet). This can lead to improved physiological functioning, and greater personal wellbeing, productivity and performance. <i>This prepares the ground for the next level of development</i>	Body Scan and Mindful Movement
<u>Intermediate</u> Life Treasure = Mind/HeartMind Focus = Harmony = Qi = Chrysalis	Gentle movement with increased ability to quieten the mind and sense/direct qi via enhanced mental concentration/visualisation Via continued practice and further development of the ability to maintain focus on “what is happening right now”, both practices promote awareness of the psychological self. Over time, this awareness enables individuals to enhance their emotional and mental health (e.g. by noticing and consequently being able to let go of harsh self-judgements and other unhelpful attitudes; by releasing negative emotions such as fear or anger that have been suppressed). Personal wellbeing, productivity and performance continue to improve. <i>This prepares the ground for the next stage of development</i>	Sitting Meditation. Leading to developing awareness that thoughts/emotions are just passing events rather than a true reflection of self
<u>Advanced</u> Heaven Treasure = Spirit Focus = Yang = Shen = Butterfly	Quiescent practices which allow mental concentration / self-awareness / intuition to develop further Both practices ultimately lead to greater awareness of the spiritual self. By steadily cultivating their physical and mental health individuals slowly peel away layers of ingrained habits, beliefs and conditioning, allowing access to spiritual insight.	Quiescent practices which allow mental concentration / self-awareness / intuition to develop further

It should be noted that this table provides a high level overview based on a combination of my direct experience of TCQ and MBAs and background reading.

It should also be noted that the levels depicted above are not mutually exclusive e.g. improvements to physiological health occur at all three stages, not just during early levels of practice, whilst some glimpses of spiritual insight can be experienced at all levels, not just in the later stages.

I have chosen to include the transformational symbols of the caterpillar, chrysalis and butterfly in the table as I think this is an excellent way to visualise the journey through these three levels. My personal interpretation of these three developmental stages follows

(although I should acknowledge again that I am including ideas from the *Healing Promise of Qi* in this exploration).

The journey through the three levels of personal development:

1. People are often initially drawn to the practice as they are stressed and/or suffering from illness. Their main desire is to maintain or restore their health. At this level many practitioners are not aware that the techniques they are using are part of a wider spiritual practice. Indeed, many would not be interested in this, being too caught up on the treadmill of their modern, materialistic lives. Like a caterpillar they are just focusing on basic survival. It is not unusual for people drop out of TCQ/MBA practice at this stage in order to try other ways of “fixing” themselves.
2. If however people continue with their practice, the regular “time out” from the almost “constant to do list of life” which both TCQ and MBAs can provide, allows people to become more reflective and self-aware. The practices can essentially guide people to an understanding that there is more to life than just surviving it. Additionally, both practices provide the tools needed for people to explore this idea further. Consistent personal practice, plus inspiration and support from fellow practitioners, provide a nurturing environment (the chrysalis) in which people can develop a deeper understanding about themselves and life in general. A major part of this work takes place at an emotional and psychological level, as people heal themselves from earlier traumas, and become less of a slave to their thoughts, conditioning and ego. Once people have had a taste of this level of practice they are less likely to give it up, even though it is often hard and challenging work which continues over many years.

I have directly experienced at least some aspects of this level in both my MBA and TCQ practice. For example:

- Within my MBA practice the realisation that thoughts are not facts was both a huge revelation and relief to me. This understanding meant I could start to observe my thoughts patterns in a more objective way, which over time enabled me to see that many of my thoughts could be classified into two categories: “I am not good enough as I am” and “I have got too much to do”. This has had a huge impact on me, for whilst I still get caught up in believing such thoughts more often than I would like, I fall into the traps they present with less frequency, or at least can haul myself out of the trap when I do fall in! This has helped me to relax into both my MBA and TQA practice more fully in recent months as I have less need “to do it better”.
 - Seemingly simple observations during my TCQ sessions can also reveal important lessons. For example, whilst playing the Nine Phases of Qi Cultivation over a period of weeks, I noticed that I spontaneously tend to do a lot more repetitions of Watching Clouds Pass (the Conserving Phase) than the other moves. This brought it home to me that I am still wasting energy on unnecessary chores and worries (i.e. I am continuing to fall into the “thought traps” described above more often than is good for me!)
3. The advanced stages of both practices are believed to allow people to uncover and understand their true self (the part of them that is already perfect and whole). They emerge like the butterfly does, with a sense of liberation.

This ultimate stage equates to obtaining freedom from the sense of dissatisfaction with life. By breaking the endless cycles of greed and aversion, of always wanting things to be different in some way, people can gain a sense of inner peace. The practice also allows

individuals to realise their connection with the whole of humanity and the world around them. In terms of TCQ in particular, advanced practitioners can experience a sense of oneness with the entire universe.

Whilst I have not been engaged with the practice of either discipline long enough to experience this to any degree it is safe to say that at times I get a taste of what this means. It is however almost impossible for me to put this into words and so I will just acknowledge this for now and continue to explore it over the coming months and years....

I think the butterfly analogy can also be used to explain how the techniques included in both TCQ and MBAs eventually metamorphose from health enhancement practices to advanced meditative practices. Essentially at this highest level of practice it seems that TCQ and MBAs are indistinguishable. For example the advanced levels of TCQ include techniques such as “Natural Flow Qigong” (Jahnke, 2002 pp.41-43) and “Guarding the One” (Jahnke, 2002 p.54), practices which encourage the individual to fully be with whatever arises, accepting it as it is. Learning “to be” in this way, stepping away from the cycle of constant “doing” is also the ultimate purpose of MBAs as already mentioned. Hence the two disciplines merge into one!

A Reflection on the Differences between TCQ and MBAs

As already noted, TCQ is considered to be principally Daoist in origin whilst MBAs have Buddhist roots. In addition to this, the practices can be differentiated in the following ways.

How to Breathe

This could almost be included in the earlier section because both practices place a heavy emphasis on breath focus. Practitioners are encouraged to follow their breath in both TCQ and MBAs, primarily because the breath is always there, in each and every moment, but also because it is a neutral aspect of experience to focus on (i.e. something that does not elicit strong emotions).

However, there is one significant difference between the practices. In TCQ, practitioners focus on abdominal breathing (also referred to as diaphragmatic or yoga breathing) – a method of breathing in which the abdomen is allowed to relax and expand on the in breath and contract on the out breath. This is widely recognised as being the most efficient way of breathing which can help to promote health and wellbeing. In contrast, in MBAs practitioners are not instructed to breathe in any particular way. Instead, they explore and accept their however their breath is at that moment, be it full or shallow, long or short, rough or smooth.

Relaxation: Key focus vs By-product

As discussed in the previous section, mind intent and awareness of the present moment are shared attributes of TCQ and MBAs. In my experience the mind is focused somewhat differently in the two practices however.

In MBAs, the intention is to be aware of whatever is most predominant in the present moment, be it the breath, body sensations, sounds, thoughts or emotions. Whatever is engaging the attention most strongly is explored with a sense of open, non-judgemental curiosity. During a single practice session the focus of attention may change multiple times to mirror how the experience of the practitioner alters over time. The intention during MBAs is not to actively encourage relaxation (although this is sometimes a “by product” of the practice). Rather the intention is just to fully “be” with whatever is occurring, regardless

of whether the experience is pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. This can mean that during some meditation sessions the MBA practitioner is far from relaxed as they directly encounter fear, frustration or other negative emotional states or feelings.

In TCQ the practitioner does intentionally promote a sense of relaxation. By purposefully clearing the mind of thoughts about the past and future, adjusting the posture into a comfortable and open stance, and adopting full abdominal breathing, both the mind and the body are actively encouraged to relax. Such clear-minded relaxation, commonly referred to as the “qigong state”, is known to promote the body’s natural self-healing capabilities, and practitioners often experience a sense of enhanced wellbeing during and following a TCQ session.

A humble itch can be used to illustrate this difference between the practices. If I experience an itch during TCQ I tend to consciously break my practice to scratch it as it disrupts my relaxation. During my MBA practice however, the intention is to explore the sensations of the itch with a sense of curiosity until it naturally dissipates (which can be easier said than done!).

The above is perhaps the main reason why many people find TCQ practice easier to pursue, at least initially. Their primary focus during the early stages of practice is to seek physical and mental relaxation and wellbeing, and MBAs do not serve this up as quickly or directly as TCQ, which can be off-putting to some.

Last but Not Least – Qi!

This is a key difference between the practices. The concept of qi, essential life energy which is at the core of Traditional Chinese Medicine, plays an elemental role in TCQ, but does not feature in MBAs at all.

Indeed, one of the main goals of TCQ practice is to learn, using mind intent, how to focus on, control and direct the qi within the body to support the maintenance and enhancement of physical and mental health. Of course many books are written about just this so I will not go into further detail here. The shortness of this description should not lead the reader to believe this topic is of minor interest to the author however. Quite the opposite is true – qi is of supreme importance to her! (Tai Chi is translated as “supreme ultimate” after all!).

Concluding Thoughts

When I started to write this paper, whilst recognising obvious parallels between TCQ and MBAs, I anticipated that the number of differences between the two modalities would be greater than the number of similarities. This analysis has therefore surprised me, by revealing so many close connections between them, and just a few key distinguishing features.

In fact it can perhaps be said that TCQ and MBAs are on the same “present moment awareness” continuum. Each discipline encourages practitioners to fully experience the present moment at both a mind and body level, rather than cruising along on automatic pilot with little conscious attention being paid to what is happening right now. Additionally both modalities help individuals to clear away conditioning and ingrained habits, leading to the ability to tune into their natural intuition and a bigger sense of who they are. Essentially, both practices help people to achieve their full potential and make the most of their lives.

Maybe it can be argued that, at least in the earlier stages of practice, TCQ is situated more towards the physical health end of the continuum (as the purposeful cultivation of enhanced levels of relaxation and qi leads to the production of internal medicine), whilst MBAs lean

more towards the improvement of psychological health and mental insight. There is definitely a blurry section in the middle of the continuum where the two modalities merge together though.

My personal experience shows how TCQ and MBAs can be mutually supportive aspects of self-care. The practice of one modality very much supports and enhances the practice of the other, as my examples throughout this paper have shown. In fact the skills and insights learnt from one practice very easily blend into the other practice, making it difficult for me to remember where I first encountered some of these lessons at times! Cultivating qi to promote health and wellbeing helps to support you in the challenges that can be faced in meditation, whilst MBAs support the ability to cultivate qi by promoting relaxed, non-judgemental awareness.

I have considered whether, when circumstances allow both practices to be conducted sequentially, it is more beneficial to do some TCQ before MBAs or vice versa. If my mind is particularly busy then it does help to spend some time on TCQ first of all, and I can sense my level of focus building during the TCQ practice session. This can set the scene nicely for some fruitful mindfulness meditation. On the other hand, mindfulness practice prior to TCQ can help to deepen my TCQ practice. Essentially there are pros and cons of each approach, but in both instances you are getting a double-helping of present moment awareness, which can only be a good thing.

If I had to chose three words to round off this paper, they would be “truth”, “healing” and “transformation”. These words have remained with me since one of my first encounters with a tai chi/meditation instructor many years ago. At that time I had a sense of their importance and the merest glimmer of understanding. From time to time over the years I have revisited these words, but it is only now that I am starting to perhaps truly understand them. They seem to reflect the principles behind TCQ and MBAs perfectly:

*By recognising the **truth** of the present moment, seeing it clearly without pre-conceived ideas and habitual judgements, you can promote the **healing** of both physical and mental aspects of the self. This in turn supports the sustained practice required to achieve spiritual insight and personal **transformation**.*

Enough said!

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