

EXPERIENCE

FROM ADDICTION TO TAI CHI

Experimental project of teaching Tai Chi
at a daytime therapeutic community for recovery from addictions

- *Chiara Bertelli* –

I am presenting, in this summary report, my experience of teaching Tai Chi within a therapeutic community for rehabilitation from alcoholism and drug addictions.

In March 2013 the director of the daytime Therapeutic Community of the local public hospital (National Healthcare Public System) situated in Legnago, Verona asked me if I was available to teach Tai Chi to the clients, since I already work at the public service for addictions (Ser.D) as an Educator and also because I am a Tai Chi Chuan instructor.

I agreed without hesitation to undertake this experience. I had no idea if it would work. However, I was sure it could represent an opportunity for the clients to experience something different which could let them discover their own potentials, stimulate the consciousness and promote change. For my part, it would provide professional and personal enrichment.

Tai Chi, also known as *meditation in movement*, is a discipline that through the development, improvement, and rediscovering of capabilities such as knowledge of one's body in space and time, self-awareness, self-control, concentration and self-confidence, brings into play many personal internal areas.

I researched similar experiences on the web. Although I did not find any practical indications or Tai Chi teaching guides for this purpose, I could see that, abroad (for example in the United States and Canada, among others), use of this ancient art of wellness has been proposed in many recovery and rehabilitation centers for addiction and also in many other areas (elderly, disabled). I didn't find any such projects in Italy.

Many scientifically documented studies prove the therapeutic effectiveness of Tai Chi, which, when combined with the practice of Qi Gong (both work on internal energy), constitutes a valuable system to maintain and enhance mental and physical wellbeing. These ancient practices are recognized by cutting-edge medicine worldwide and are approved by the World Health Organization.

Below are the details of my project entitled: "From addiction to Tai Chi – Experimental project of teaching Tai Chi at a Therapeutic Community for rehabilitation from addictions."

The path

I cannot say that this has been an easy and linear path; because there were dropouts and newcomers in the community, the clients did not all have the same amount of class time.

Tai Chi is an art for which benefits can be achieved only through constant practice. Class attendance is therefore already a goal in itself and perseverance one of the main problems to face. Both these objectives require interest in the activity. None of the clients knew Tai Chi except one who in the past had worked in China. Some clients were expecting fast movements, kicks, punches and other martial techniques; their impression of Tai Chi was of a martial art that would prepare them for combat. This was not the main focus.

However, there is a fascinating world that has developed around this ancient art, and I was able to explore during my classes such subjects as the harmony of Yin and Yang, the elements and their interactions, the body, energy and much more. Fascinating stories and Zen anecdotes chosen for their appropriateness have from time to time been small but valuable supports that helped me a lot, especially at the beginning.

In a context such as that of a therapeutic community for addiction, the goals that can be achieved at different levels, depending on the consistency and level of physical and mental abilities of each person, include: momentary well-being, stimulation of reflection, knowledge and body awareness, increase of sensitivity proprioception, improved flexibility, coordination, balance, concentration, serenity, mental well-being, motivation to change and, finally, correct learning of Tai Chi. Those who attend constantly can achieve all these goals.

Of course, the purpose of this activity is to support the community commitment, in order to help the clients to stay clean, finding in it a further stimulus toward change.

Before starting I held two meetings with the operators of the community to present the project and to define the organization.

The first lesson was attended by some operators in order to assist some clients. After that, I considered and decided that the operators of the center should not be present at the lessons because I believe that my lessons should remain separate from community involvement, to avoid interference and/or overlaps and to make sure that students do not feel affected in any way.

After the first lessons, a third meeting with the community equipe was necessary in order to review again some organizational aspects and to minimize some negative factors relative to the room. The lessons take place in a very small space, the dining room, and before starting each lesson the clients have to prepare the room by placing the tables along the wall. Also, since the space is also a second passageway room where you can enter into the community from the back, I asked that the door be closed during my lesson. Sometimes, I tried to do the lessons at the park adjacent to the

community, but unfortunately that place is not appropriate because the clients are too distracted by the activities that take place outside.

Many clients participated in the first lessons, pushed and prodded by the operators. Thereafter, the group was smaller: not everyone liked the activity, and this is normal! Others were unable to participate for severe physical reasons, and others had to attend to other community program activities.

There remained a small group of 5 to 6 people, some of whom are still continuing with excellent results and great satisfaction. Other new students have obtained good results during periods of consistent study.

On June 19, 2014, one year after the classes began, four of my students (three males and one female) in treatment for alcohol dependence, who attended classes most consistently, agreed to perform in a small demonstration of Tai Chi at the community's annual party. Authorities, family, acquaintances, and my martial arts master Maurizio Mingotti were all invited to the event.

Well, it was a surprise for all! In a situation that would have been anxiety producing for any unaccustomed person, my students were able to maintain calm and tranquillity, performing with dignity. A real achievement! The satisfaction was great! At the end of the demonstration the audience, especially the parents, expressed much emotion at seeing what the clients were able to do.

The project is still continuing with classes twice a week, on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons from 3:00 to 4:15 p.m.

Through the teaching of Tai Chi I was able to establish a good relationship with the clients; without it, no teaching could be effective.

This experience was for me further proof that when the road that you choose to undertake looks difficult, if you follow your heart and do your best, rewards come.

Tai Chi alone is probably not in itself sufficient to ensure success in recovery, but it can certainly be a useful ingredient and a good opportunity for those who want it and undertake to make positive changes on their individual and personal path.

My basic motivation in this project was the thought that "we are spiritual beings who are living a material experience" at different levels of awareness and that people do not all use the same channels in dealing with their difficulties.

Some specific technical aspects

For the first three months the Tai Chi lessons were held for an hour a week; after that and currently twice a week, on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons from 3:00 to 4:15 p.m. The schedule was made taking into account the programming needs of the community.

During this activity I had to deal with aspects of the typical behaviours of people who have had a history of alcohol and drug addiction, and with the many physical difficulties of those who have not exercised for a long time. In particular, they presented with stiff joints, muscle weakness, poor coordination (aggravated and more evident because of pharmacologic therapies), drowsiness, lack of balance, dormant reflexes, very weak concentration (short or absent), agitation, distraction, and tiredness.

During the first lessons and at any inclusion of a new client in the group, I wanted it to be well understood that the style of behaviour I wanted was to be respected during the lessons. We observe the “Dojo” rules (a Japanese term in martial arts: the place of practice), such as a greeting before and after each lesson, punctuality, respecting each other, courtesy. No one is allowed to disrupt or denigrate others, but helping each other is encouraged.

The path develops through the Pa Tuan Chin and Qi Gong, preparatory energy exercises that are repeated in each lesson; the Tai Chi form; and exercises performed in pairs like the Tui Shou (Push Hands). I started teaching a Tai Chi form that is easy, short and symmetrical, the Golden Form of the Fu Style (15 postures). During the second year I started teaching the “24 form,” which is more elaborate. Instruction of this form continues to this day. When necessary, I explain and demonstrate the martial applications of Tai Chi. I emphasize the importance of correct posture, both during the Pa Tuan Chin exercises and the Tai Chi form, and I suggest proper breathing. Classes are held with relaxing background music.

During the Pa Tuan Chin exercises I often repeat that everyone must perform slowly and without straining in order to avoid injury; it is important to listen to their own bodies.

Objectives achieved

The group currently consists of three females and two males, from 40 to 50 years old; all are in care for rehabilitation of alcohol addiction. Occasionally we enjoy the simultaneous presence of all five. The males are more regular in their attendance, especially one of them who, since he started in February 2014, has never missed a lesson! The other male, although he joined the activity from the beginning, has had periods of absence.

The females are often absent because of relapses and hospitalizations.

The clients, before every lesson, ready the room for me and welcome me punctually. They demonstrate an attitude of “protection of space and time” of the lesson by empowering their community companions. Everyone wears the t-shirt of the School, presented to those who attend regularly. The rules of the “Dojo” are respected.

During the lesson the clients’ attention and commitment have become excellent, and the atmosphere is quiet and pleasant. The concentration is very good despite frequent disturbances

coming from outside. Coordination of movements, flexibility and balance have improved more and more.

In March 2014, as described in more detail in the first part of the report, four of my students agreed to perform at a small demonstration of Tai Chi at the annual “Community Party” to everyone’s satisfaction.

One of the clients participated from January to May 2015 at evening classes at the public school of Tai Chi near his village, together with his parents. This man has the potential to continue in the way of Tai Chi and become a coach because he is acquiring good skills. I have instructed him to be my “alternate” when I can’t teach the lesson because of other commitments.

The clients’ opinions

For privacy reasons, it is not possible to publish the faces of my students, but I can report their impressions.

Interviews after one year of activity:

“It has been useful from the physical point of view. When I do Tai Chi, I move more nimbly, my joints work better; before, I was very blocked. Also from the mental point of view, I can concentrate and relax. At home, I train and practice.”

“At the community party I was very excited, there were people I didn't know, especially the authorities, but I managed to do my best and I am happy to have been able to do it.”

“My joints are improved, back, feet, legs ... and mentally I am more focused, calm and relaxed.”

After two years:

“I’m currently doing a work stage so I cannot attend the classes for now. I really miss the Pa Tuan Chin, because it made me feel better. I practice when I can at home, but I am going to attend again one afternoon when I don’t work.”

“I’m more relaxed. Certain physical aches caused by tension are decreased.”

“Before the lesson I feel tired ... I don't have desire to do anything. Just starting the lesson, everything passes and I am fine. After the lesson, I feel relaxed.”

“I would like to attend the public evening classes of Tai Chi at my village.”

“I am happy to do an activity that I didn't even know existed. The Pa Tuan Chin, regularly done, has helped me get rid of my back pain.”

“The Tai Chi form relaxes me. In contrast, the Pa Tuan Chin warms me because it takes effort. The form, being slower, relaxes me more.”

“The Tai Chi form activates in me more mental work, internal work, concentration, memory. The Pa Tuan Chin, by contrast, is more physical. By mental work I also mean the coordination and the connection between mind and body, between thinking and doing.”

“I would like to learn more forms.”

“I prefer the Pa Tuan Chin because it relaxes me. But the more complicated movements make me feel a little anxious because I am afraid of making mistakes and I feel uncomfortable” (said a girl who is new to the classes).

“I well remember last year at the Community Party” (said to the others with enthusiasm).

“Tai Chi helps us to know our limits and to overcome them.”

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