

Professor Yin Mei Critchell

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE AND MODERN DANCE TECHNIQUE

Introduction

This course offers an approach to modern dance technique grounded in principles derived from Asian contemplative practice. Specifically, employing visualization and energy direction techniques central to Tai Chi, students will learn a concept of movement that focuses, not on the final or end result of movement, but on the flow of energy within the body.

Concentrating on the *motivation* behind movement, students will come to understand modern dance from an *internal* rather than *external* perspective. Just as Tai Chi promotes a state of mind in which movement can be produced without conscious effort or physical tension, this course will thus explore an approach to modern technique aimed at creating movement that is more efficient, less injury-prone, more connected to the whole mind, body and spirit.

Course Description

Tai Chi is a social, cultural and historical phenomenon stretching back virtually to the dawn of Chinese civilization and is, unquestionably, a core element of the Chinese belief system. Tai Chi Chuan is a movement practice based on the Yin/Yang concept which is central to this belief system. “Wu” style Tai Chi Chuan is the oldest of a number of specific types of Tai Chi Chuan.

Briefly described, Tai Chi Chuan is a system involving precise physical movements and guided mental intention that seeks to promote a “relaxed” consciousness capable of channeling the flow of electromagnetic energy -- otherwise known as “chi” -- through the meridian system of the human body. Based on ancient Chinese beliefs which hold that disease and ill health are the result of energy blockages centering in the internal organs at junctures corresponding with the meridian system, Tai Chi Chuan provides a practical means of restoring fundamental balance between mind and body by working to relieve these blockages, thus allowing the “chi” (or “life force”) to flow freely and improve health. Beyond its importance in this area, Tai Chi Chuan – in conjunction with the central Chinese concept of Yin and Yang -- is at the heart of all of the Chinese movement and performing arts (from dance to kung fu).

The course will revolve around the hypothesis that principles gleaned from Tai Chi can provide the basis for a new approach to post-modern dance and movement. Specifically, the underlying principles of Tai Chi – in particular, the concept of balance derived from the Yin/Yang concept – can provide a crucial linkage between Western concepts of physiological movement (as manifested, for example, in Alexander technique, “movement release,” Feldenkrais, the work of Todd and other disciplines emphasizing body-mind integration, dynamic alignment and kinetic and sensory awareness) and Chinese concepts of “internal” motion and change. Various aspects of contemporary dance and movement will then be explored with the aim of discovering how Tai Chi (and Tai Chi Chuan) can bring a fresh perspective to these disciplines.

The goal of the course is to achieve focus, efficiency and precision in movement through visualization and energy direction techniques that alter the treatment of energy and momentum and foster a more balanced approach to the body/ground relationship. Employing

mental intention as the driving force of movement, students learn to improve their sensibility, support, alignment, mobility, strength and flexibility.

Content

This slowly paced class allows the student to develop a detailed understanding of skeletal alignment through energy release and recharge in action, focusing on placement, movement initiation, sequencing and pathway of movement in the body and in space. While concepts of space, time, shape, action and energy are constantly addressed, a coordinated and weighted use of the body and in space is emphasized. While concepts of space, time, shape, action and energy are constantly addressed, a coordinated and weighted use of the body in space is emphasized. The course uses a combination of floorwork, centrework and travelling sequences.

Learning Strategy

Instructor-led practical sessions cover meditation, Tai Chi exercises, general floor and centre work, with an emphasis on mental intention alignment practice and development of increased body awareness in a motional context. All exercises and sequences are approached from a “contemplative” movement perspective with an emphasis on energy direction, spatial projection, shape, flow and a weighted use of the body in space. Detailed anatomical information and imagery accompanies exercises and studies given in order to support students in their learning. Awareness work, as well as encouragement to explore and discover within given tasks support technique, enabling students to be able to learn to set phrases precisely and meaningfully. The function of the body in dance practice is central to this course students are asked to keep a journal to support their understanding and growth in technique.

Assessment

Criteria for assessment:

Process – 50% of mark awarded.

Students should demonstrate: Consistent, continuous practice through regular attendance and participation. Applied learning practice – Physical and intellectual commitment throughout the class, including preparation and revision as appropriate, to reflect further on performance skills.

An ability to use initiative to articulate concerns and response to feedback specific to the technique studied. A sense of progression of the term that clarifies their working process.

Progress – 50% of mark awarded.

Students should demonstrate: Focus and concentration in classwork, awareness of correct body posture (alignment) and efficient use of the body in action (coordination, weight, flow) in set phrases. Ongoing physical development of strength, flexibility and balance. Awareness of musicality within the style – timing, dynamics rhythm and quality in movement. Clarity of space in sequences – directional facing, dimensions, floor plan or design, and an awareness to others in space. The ability to retain sequences from week to week (as appropriate) and to begin to use movement interpretation to extend physical performance.

COURSE OUTLINE:

I. Historical and Theoretical Aspects of Tai Chi

A. The Concept of Yin and Yang

1. Historical Roots
 - (i) Taoism (Non-Action)
 - (ii) Buddhism (Inner Seeing)
 - (iii) Confucianism (Relationship/Balance)
2. Conceptual underpinnings
 - (i) Opposition
 - (ii) Interdependence
 - (iii) Mutually consuming
 - (iv) Inter-transformation
3. The Chinese “Meridian” System

B. Underlying Principles of Tai Chi Chuan

1. Natural Motion: Tai Chi as the Result of the Internal Transformation of Stillness and Change
2. Natural Reflection: Regaining the Intuitive Mind

II. Tai Chi Chuan as a System of Movement

A. Yin/Yang balance

1. “Ba Gua” (The Eight Directions)
 - (i) Each direction related to a part of the human body and meridian system.
 - (ii) The rule of circularity.
2. “Wu Xing” (The Five Elements)

- (i) Meaning of the Five Elements (Water, Fire, Wood, Metal, Earth)
- (ii) The Five Elements in nature
 - a. Five elements as basic qualities
 - b. Five elements as movement
 - c. Five elements as seasonal cycles
 - d. Five elements in interrelationship
 - e. Five elements in correspondence
- (iii) The Five Elements and the Body

B. The Seven Stages of Tai Chi Chuan Practice

- 1. Xing (steps or movements)
- 2. Jin (energy)
- 3. Chi (life force)
- 4. Yi (mind)
- 5. Shen (spirit)
- 6. Xiu (emptiness)
- 7. Tao (“Nirvana”)

II. The Essentials of “Wu” Style Tai Chi Chuan

A. Basic Principles of “Wu” Style Tai Chi Chuan

- 1. Meditation
 - a. Stillness meditation
 - b. Meditation in motion
- 2. Circularity of energy (the “Three Roots”)

- (i) Circularity of the hips to the feet
- (ii) Circularity of the waist to the tip of the head
- (iii) Circularity of the shoulder to the tip of the fingers

B. Basic Forms of “Wu” Style Tai Chi Chuan (Exercises)

C. Further studies

1. “Push Hands”
2. Use of Sword, etc.
3. “Chi Gong”

III. Tai Chi as the Basis for a New Approach to Post-Modern Dance and Movement

A. Release, continuity and emptiness

1. Tai Chi and “visualization”
2. Tai Chi and Concepts of dynamic alignment
3. Tai Chi and kinesthetic theory
4. Tai Chi and the importance of the spine, the center axis and the centerless body
5. Tai Chi and the concept of energy direction and circularity

B. Practical application

1. Meditation
2. Exercises
 - a. “Visiting the bottom of the sea”
 - b. “Empty arm swing”
 - c. “Total circulation”
 - d. “Empty leg swing”

- e. Lifting and settling the skeleton
- 3. Regulation of Movement
 - (i) From Action to Stillness (“Liang Xiang”)
 - (ii) From Stillness to Action (“Qi Fa”)
- 4. The Eight Characteristic Movements
 - (i) “Ning” (twisting)
 - (ii) “Qing” (tilted)
 - (iii) “Yuan” (circular)
 - (iv) “Qu” (curving)
 - (v) “Yang” (face upward)
 - (vi) “Fu” (looking over)
 - (vii) “Fan” (turning)
 - (viii) “Juan” (rolling)

IV. Modern Dance

A. Class organization

- 1. Floorwork
- 2. Centrework
- 3. Travelling sequences

B. Objectives

- 1. Work with focus, efficiency and precision in a way, individually and in groups.
- 2. Through visualization, energy direction, make precise use of weight and momentum in order to achieve accuracy in movement and economic use of the body in space.

3. Learn to ask questions relevant to dance practice: Alignment, mobility, strength, flexibility, use of breath support, stability, body/ground relationship and torso/limb relationship.

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