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Slowing down in a fast world



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JUNE 21, 2015 20:23 IST

UPDATED: JUNE 21, 2015 20:23 IST

A Tai Chi practitioner shares how this martial art has helped him beat stress

I joined Tai Chi in 1999. The class was run by Sifu George Thomas, one of the pioneers of Tai Chi in India. I had read an article about him and I was fascinated by the benefits it promised: calmness, strength, flexibility and health.

It was difficult to learn; the free-flowing movements looked easy, but to actually do it took a lot of effort and practice. I didn't have the patience to complete the course and I was not feeling any of the promised benefits, so I left midway. The next couple of years were a blur, and I don't remember much of them, but 2001 is etched in my memory as the worst year of my life.

One Sunday afternoon in February, my father had lunch, went to his bedroom, and collapsed. In the blink of an eye he was gone, and life would never be the same for me. Along with the irreplaceable loss of my father, the burden of running a company with a hundred employees fell on my shoulders. There were too many emotions – loss, sadness, worry, anxiety – churning inside me. I thought things couldn't get worse, but they did. Six months later, I lost my mother. She was in perfect health, just recovering from my father's death, and was on her way to my sister's place in the U.S. when she had a stroke in London. She died in hospital a few days later. I was in a state of shock. The tears that ran freely the last six months just stopped coming. I had difficulty sleeping, and would often wake up in a sweat. Day time was no better, as the worries of running the factory in a time of recession were immense. Just getting enough work to meet expenses was difficult. Some months, we would break even and others, not. I knew I needed to de-stress and decided to give Tai Chi another try.

I called up Sifu George Thomas and asked if I could rejoin, and he graciously agreed. I learnt the rest of the forms and started practising them. Tai Chi movements are hard to learn, and it takes a while to notice the effect it is having on your body and mind, but the benefits are cumulative and immense. The results, for me, were very slow and subtle. It was something as simple as feeling fresher in the mornings before going to work. I gradually noticed that my shoulders were beginning to relax and a chronic lower back pain faded away.

Further into the practice, I noticed things that used to get me tense and angry were no longer having that effect on me. It was different from getting angry and suppressing it. Here, there was no anger at all. It helped me deal with equanimity in certain situations, with much better results. Tai Chi helped me tide over that bad phase which lasted a few years, not by making things better, but by changing how I responded to situations, some of which were beyond my control.

I've been doing Tai Chi every day now for 14 years, for twenty minutes each in the morning and evening. If there's one thing I've learnt from the practice, it is that there are no quick fixes in life. There are no get-rich-quick schemes that really work in the real world. Anything of value has to be earned the hard way with diligence and practice. In a world of instant gratification, fast food, fast cars and fast money, here's something that is slow, takes time, but really works.

As Sifu George often says, "Slow down, and most of the things you are chasing will come to you."

Printable version | Nov 14, 2018 10:35:23 AM |

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