

THE CHARACTERS OF TAI CHI

We will concentrate on the Chinese characters for Tai Chi and Chi Gong. We especially want to emphasize that the Chi in Tai Chi is a different word from the Chi in Chi Gong.

Each syllable in Chinese has a theoretical meaning. However, most actual Chinese WORDS are two syllable combinations, and quite often the meaning of the combination will be very different from what is expected given the meaning of each syllable. Another important point is that a syllable can survive as part of compounds long after it has become obsolete as a meaningful unit. This has happened to the Chi in Tai Chi, which is only to be found in the larger dictionaries today.

A second point is that each syllable has one of four tones. There is (1)high even, (2)rising, (3)falling then rising and (4)falling. Even with the addition of the tone, however, any Chinese syllable (with tone) will have multiple meanings, which are distinguished in writing by different characters and in speaking by context. This is one of the features that makes Chinese a little difficult for foreigners.

In the case of Tai Chi, the tones are 4 and 2, so we could write it as Tai4 Chi2 or Tàì Chí . Chi Gong in contrast has tones Chi4 Gong1 or Chì Gōng .

Now for the characters for Tai Chi.

Tài is straightforward: it means , great, very, or even too much. No problem here. To look it up a dictionary you spell it tài.

Chi in contrast is not so simple. Originally it meant roof beam. It is now an obsolete character, but can be found as number 484 in the Wade Giles dictionary. In a modern dictionary it would be jí.

When the two characters are combined, they form a word used in Chinese Philosophy and meaning, roughly, fundamental Principle. This meaning was taken over for the fundamental practice of exercise, and thus we have Tàì Chí for our favorite activity.

Now for Chi Gong.

The Chi in Chi Gong is fourth tone, Chi4 or Chì. Its primary meaning is air or gas but in compounds it often means breath or even, by extension, life. Dictionary spelling is Qì.

Gong1 or Gōng has the dictionary meaning service or Merit. The dictionary spelling is gōng.

A large, bold Chinese character '功' (Gōng) is displayed in a traditional calligraphic style. It consists of a vertical stroke on the left and a horizontal stroke on the right, with a small hook at the end of the horizontal stroke.

The two characters don't quite add up to our meaning of Chì Gōng but they come pretty close. Breath Control might be a good literal translation, but as often is the case the literal translation does not quite do the job; hence we just use the Chinese term.

The large characters are the traditional forms and are still used by many practitioners of Tai Chi. The small characters are the modern forms.

I hope you have found my little presentation informative.