


Freezing the form

Mark Guest

A man with a beard and glasses, wearing a red swim cap and goggles, is smiling while holding a large, clear piece of ice in a body of water. The background shows ripples on the water surface.

Tai chi as an internal art has a lot in common with ice swimming where it can, literally, become a matter of life and death writes tai chi instructor and ice swimmer Mark Guest

TAI CHI

Ice swimming is swimming outside in water below 5°C wearing only a basic swimming costume, goggles and a swimming hat. It has seen significant growth in the last ten years, helped by the ice mile challenge introduced by the International Ice Swimming Association (IISA). There are also events held by IISA and the International Winter Swimming Association among others, and the third IISA world championships was held in Murmansk, Russia in March 2019.

In the autumn social media comes alive with the same questions from people looking to get into ice swimming. 'How long can I stay out?' 'What temperature is safe?' 'How often should I swim?' and so on. There are obviously some guidelines e.g. don't go in for half an hour if you've never done it before. However, this is very general advice, and as any experienced ice swimmer will tell you, every ice swimmer is different and every ice swim they do is different. This is serious stuff, as no ice swimmer can remain in the water indefinitely, and an inexperienced swimmer can experience hypothermia within minutes, leading to loss of mobility and consciousness, and the risk of drowning.



Lesson is in session

Ice swimming is about a conversation with your body: listening, learning and reacting. To be a safe ice swimmer, you must have a heightened awareness of your own body, what it is capable of and what it is telling you. When an ice swimmer first begins their ice journey, they need to learn to be aware of how they are feeling, including before they go into the water, whilst swimming and during the recovery (the afterdrop! Ice swimming is all about the afterdrop). This allows the swimmer to start to learn what



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their limits are for any particular swim, and any warning signals to look out for.

Into the unknown

During an ice swimmer's initial training, anything unfamiliar whilst swimming may mean having to cut short a swim in case it is a crucial warning sign. This could be a range of things such as difficulty with the stroke, an ache, a twinge or just a funny feeling. Depending on the outcome, this will give you the experience to know whether to carry on or not the next time it happens. Ice swimming does involve learning to ignore a lot of pain and even agony that would normally be taken as a signal to stop whatever you are doing immediately. For example, the hand pain is often likened to having your hands slammed in car doors, though this does subside after a few seasons. This means that being fully mindful of your whole body and every signal and subtle difference is crucial.

Ice swimmers also enjoy discussing the different things that they notice when they are ice swimming, and these conversations highlight that there is a lot of commonality as well as difference. For example, some ice swimmers notice that teeth start to feel cold, whilst others don't. The common response from an ice swimmer who hasn't felt what another swimmer describes, is that they will look out for it next time. We are always learning.





Ice swimming championships Murmansk

As this shows, you cannot tell someone exactly how to ice swim, only how to learn how to ice swim safely themselves. This is the same as tai chi. Learning the movements is the pathway to enabling the student to find tai chi for themselves. The equivalent questions to those of the ice swimmer above might be, 'How far away from my body should I hold my hand?', 'How fast should I do this?', and 'How many times will I have to practise this?' As with ice swimming, answers can be given, and of course everyone has to have some guidance and instruction to make a start. However, these answers only take someone to the starting line. Proceeding from this is about beginning that conversation between the body and mind, and developing awareness and response. Martial applications take this further, introducing the need to listen to the opponent's body. Slavishly rolling back when engaging an opponent is highly unlikely to produce

anything other than a grapple without responding to changes in their centre and balance, which have to be felt. Exactly mimicking the external appearance of a position or movement is not tai chi, just as ice swimming is not looking up in a general table how long you can stay in the water. Getting this wrong can genuinely lead to ice swimmers finding themselves in life threatening situations.

There are other similarities between ice swimming and tai chi, and although I doubt this will encourage anyone to try ice swimming, hopefully it has provided some insight that can be of use to all tai chi practitioners. 🌐

Mark Guest is now in his sixth season of ice swimming. He is the 197th person to complete an Ice Mile (2017) and competed for Team GB at the Third IISA World Championships.



Ice swimming championships Murmansk

As well as ice swimming Mark is a dedicated tai chi practitioner. Immersing himself in the practice he rapidly become an instructor in the Kai Ming School. Based on this, he was able to develop techniques and exercises that enabled the swimmers he helped to improve further. Kai Ming practises Cheng Man Ching style tai chi, which is based on Yang style tai chi, one of the most popular in the world. People can find out more about ice swimming at www.internationaliceswimming.com

The best place to find local groups and places is through Facebook, searching for wild swimming and ice swimming groups. He runs the Greater Birmingham Ice and Wild Swimmers Facebook group.