

Health Insights Today

A SERVICE OF THE CLEVELAND COLLEGE FOUNDATION

Late Fall 2008, Volume 1, Issue 4

Tai Chi: Exercise for Life

By Donald D. Davis, Ph.D.



Dr. Donald Davis demonstrates Snake Creeps Down.

Going for an early morning walk in China brings one into contact with people of all ages moving together slowly and serenely in small groups throughout every public park. Their faces display a soft look of contentment and rapt attention while their arms trace graceful arcs in the air. After several minutes the group comes to a stop, all facing the same direction; they stand silently and still, seemingly lost in another world. Most likely you've been watching tai chi, one of the great treasures of Chinese culture.

Martial Art and Method for Inner Development

Tai chi, short for *tai chi chuan* (pronounced *tie gee chwan*), is a system of physical, psychological and spiritual cultivation developed centuries ago in China as a martial art that fused together methods of self-defense with methods for cultivating internal energy and inner tranquility. Tai chi is rooted in Daoism,

China's oldest wisdom tradition that provides the foundation for Chinese medicine and many Chinese arts such as calligraphy, painting, poetry, and garden design. Tai chi employs slow, rhythmic movement and precise postural alignment coordinated with breathing and mental focus. Deeper and more profound than Western approaches to exercise, tai chi is moving meditation.



Meditation in movement

The origins of tai chi are uncertain. Some claim Zhang Sanfeng, a Daoist monk who lived during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368 C.E.), is the founder. Zhang, it is believed, created the supple movements of tai chi after watching a snake twist and turn to avoid the pecks of an attacking bird. Others claim that tai chi was created during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 C.E.) by the Chen Family, founders of one of the five major lineages of tai chi still practiced today. Yet others claim that tai chi has a more ancient origin, that it was developed by unknown Daoist adepts centuries ago to enhance health and meditation practice by balancing the flow of the body's internal energy (*qi*, pronounced *chee*) much like acupuncture but without using needles.

Although movements that resemble tai chi postures are depicted in manuscripts that date to the second century B.C.E., the tai chi we see today is the product of 20th century innovation. It was only in the 1920s that the Yang family (in particular *Yang Chengfu*) created a form of tai chi that emphasized slow steady movement that was taught for the first time to the public. This form of tai chi began to be taught in the United States in the 1950s and is most widely practiced today.



Carry Tiger and Return to the Mountain

Exercise and Moving Meditation

More than mere physical exercise, with its emphasis only on strengthening the body, tai chi emphasizes integrated strengthening of body, mind and spirit. It employs the two major approaches to meditation—concentrative meditation with focus on some object such as counting the breath and mindfulness meditation with its use of relaxed and unfocused awareness. Poetic names of tai chi movements, such as “Carry Tiger and Return to Mountain,” “Snake Creeps Down,” and “Single Whip,” remind the practitioner of the essence and feeling of each movement that should be cultivated during its practice.

Centuries of practice have provided much anecdotal evidence of the effectiveness of tai chi to the Chinese people. In the West, however, scientific research is the preferred method for documenting treatment effects. Researchers have begun to turn their attention to tai chi, and many health benefits have been supported by scientific research.

Here are some of the evidence-based health benefits of tai chi practice with a few supportive references provided for illustration:

- Improve balance and prevent falls ¹⁻⁴
- Enhance cardiorespiratory function ^{3,5}
- Lower blood pressure, heart rate, hypertension, and cholesterol ^{3,5,6}
- Relieve symptoms of arthritis ^{3,7}
- Boost immune system response ^{3,8}
- Reduce bone loss ⁹
- Enhance sleep and decrease daytime sleepiness ^{10,11}
- Relieve psychological symptoms such as anxiety and depression ^{3,12}
- Enhance psychological states such as well-being and quality of life ^{3,12}

Due to health benefits such as these, *Time* magazine (August 5, 2002) called tai chi chuan “the perfect exercise,” especially for seniors.

Benefits at Different Levels of Practice

At the most accessible level of practice, tai chi is a marvelous form of physical exercise and health cultivation. Its gentle and flowing movement allows it to be practiced by virtually anyone and is safe for those who may be physically challenged. At the same time, tai chi movements can be done more vigorously and can challenge the most physically fit practitioners. Relaxed turning and twisting of the body strengthens core muscles and stretches tendons and ligaments; shifting body weight from leg to leg improves balance and builds bone density in the hips and legs.

At a more advanced level of practice, tai chi is a formidable martial art. Every subtle turn of hand and shift of weight is a hidden self-defense application. Unlike more familiar martial arts such as karate that rely on strength and speed to overpower an opponent, tai chi relies instead on relaxation and internal energy to achieve its effects. Because of its subtlety, achievement of martial arts prowess in tai chi takes longer than other martial arts.

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At its highest level of practice, tai chi is a means of spiritual cultivation, a way to use principles of Daoism to manage life's contradictions and challenges. Tai chi principles such as balance, harmony, relaxed awareness, and doing every activity with minimum effort and integrated body, mind and spirit (no multi-tasking allowed!) are practiced in every moment of daily life. Being cut off while driving on the freeway becomes an opportunity to practice yielding and releasing annoyance and frustration. Misfortune allows one to let go of sadness and return to emotional balance. Good fortune provides the chance to extend oneself without grasping and holding on too tightly. Interpersonal conflict gives one the chance to explore both sides of an issue to search for its underlying point of balance and harmony. Weeding in the garden becomes an opportunity to merge mind and breath with every pull of the arm.

In time, one lives life with a tai chi mind and body that are soft, yielding, accepting, and unafraid. This may be the most valuable benefit of persistent tai chi practice and is what distinguishes it from mere physical exercise.



Single Whip

Finding a Teacher

Students seeking a tai chi teacher today are challenged with abundance. Tai chi teachers traditionally hid their art from the public, but today they may be seen in many recreation centers and health clubs. This easy availability creates a challenging paradox. Tai chi teachers may be easily found, but they may not be teaching authentic tai chi. Some teachers have a low level of skill and a superficial understanding of the art. They may be able to teach only the art's physical movements. Some teach practices called tai chi that may instead be types of *qigong* (pronounced *chee gong*, a related but different Chinese art). Some of these practices, for example *tai chi chih*, employ principles taken from tai chi chuan and may achieve similar health improvement outcomes. Other practices, for example *tai chi kung*, employ different principles and may not achieve the same benefits. Some teach abbreviated versions of tai chi that extract a few movements developed for special populations, for example, tai chi for arthritis, tai chi for wellness and tai chi for diabetes. The challenge with each of these abbreviated forms is that a student does not receive authentic, comprehensive tai chi teaching and therefore may not achieve the same health outcomes.

Authentic tai chi masters are difficult to find, but they are teaching in most cities. Here is what to look for. In their bearing, high-level tai chi teachers will seem modest, nonjudgmental, relaxed, calm, and centered. They smile easily and are often light-hearted and whimsical; after all, *lighten* is the root of *enlightenment*. With a deep understanding of the art, they should be able to answer questions based on their personal experience of the internal cultivation resulting from tai chi practice rather than merely repeat what they have read in books or what their teacher told them.

Ideally, the teacher will be trained in one of the five major lineages in tai chi (Yang, Chen, Sun and Wu; note there are two Wu families with different Chinese names but that appear the same when translated into English). Lineage matters because it increases the likelihood that the teacher is passing down authentic tai chi knowledge accumulated over the centuries. Students should search for the best teacher they can find no matter the distance, cost or inconvenience.

Traditional Chinese advice concerning the search for a good teacher is, when the student is ready the teacher will appear. Another teaching is it takes three years for a student to find a teacher, and three years for a teacher to decide

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if he or she will teach the student. If one practices tai chi with dedication and an open heart, even with a teacher with limited skills, one will sooner or later find the teacher that one needs to achieve the next stage of development.

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