



Tai Chi - *Mindfulness in motion*

Tai Chi Chuan and Mindfulness: two ancient exercises of mind and body, two merging philosophies helping body and mind to work in unison.

Introduction to Tai Chi Chuan

When the Western world thinks of "martial arts," it inevitably thinks of kicking, punching, fighting, and body contact. Not slow, rhythmic, and meditative body movements designed to enhance relaxation, inner calm, and peace. But that's what the martial art of Tai Chi Chuan is all about, slow, rhythmic, meditative movements designed to help you find peace and calm. Tai Chi is also a great way to go back to exercise as it is low impact, gentle and easy to perform.

What is Tai Chi, and where does it come from?

Tai Chi is a centuries-old Chinese martial art that descends from Qigong, an ancient Chinese discipline that has its roots in traditional Chinese medicine. According to some records, Tai Chi dates back as far as 2,500 years! It involves a series of slow, meditative body movements that were originally designed for self-defence and to promote inner peace and calm.

Tai Chi is considered a soft or internal form of martial art and has multiple long and short forms associated with the most popular styles in existence: Wu, Yang, and Chen (named after their creators). Plenty of people practice the faster, more combative forms that appear to resemble Kung Fu, but the slower, meditative movements are what most of us think about when we think of Tai Chi.

Benefits of Tai Chi

More than 40 studies have been done on the effects of Tai Chi on mood and overwhelmingly, it has been shown to significantly relieve depression and anxiety (helping patients reduce medication intake), and alleviate withdrawal symptoms during drug-and-alcohol treatment programs.

In a 2007 UCLA study (Irwin, M. "Journal of the American Geriatrics Society," April 2007), researchers found that subjects who practiced Tai Chi had twice the immune response as the control subjects. According to the UCLA head researcher, the study suggests that "Tai Chi is an approach that might complement and augment the efficacy of vaccines."

A new study in the Journal of Alzheimer's Disease seems to indicate that adding a little Tai Chi to your life could help lower your risk for developing dementia or Alzheimer's disease. According to the study:

“Compared with those in the no-intervention group, participants in the Tai Chi and Social Interaction groups showed significant increases in total brain volume over the intervention period as well as improvements on several neuropsychological measures”. (*Journal of Alzheimer's Disease* (2012) 757–766).

Researchers from the University of South Florida collaborated with Chinese researchers to compare the effects of Tai Chi on the brain. They split 120 elderly Shanghai residents into four groups: one group practiced Tai Chi, one walked, another upped their social interaction, and the last group just went about their normal routines.

The results? After 40 weeks, those who practiced Tai Chi three times a week had the biggest improvements in brain volume, an important part of cognition since grey matter typically shrinks with age. The social group also saw an improvement, but not as significant as the Tai Chi group. Researchers suggest that the high level of attention needed for the different Tai Chi movements could be what sets it apart.

The Tufts Medical Centre in Boston funded a study on knee osteoarthritis. The study shows that adults with knee osteoarthritis, (the most common joint disease in midlife), saw up to three times greater improvement in both pain and joint function from bi-weekly Tai Chi sessions. And a study from Ireland found that a combination of exercise, meditation, and breathing helped relieve anxiety and depression among study participants.

Tai Chi History.

Tai Chi Chuan's theory and practice are believed to have been first created by a Taoist monk called Zhang Sanfeng in the 12th century using some of the principles of Confucian philosophy. What we know for sure is that Yang Luchan who was arguably the best Tai Chi master of all times, made it popular at the Emperor's court in Beijing in the 18th century. Yang Luchan himself was originally taught by the Chen family and trained with them for over 18 years. Then Yang Luchan moved to Beijing and started to teach the art in the capital where he became famous throughout China for being undefeatable. According to Chinese martial arts historians, many tried but none ever succeeded. The Yang style of Tai Chi Chuan was born!

Tai Chi Styles.

The best known Tai Chi master today is without doubt Yan Cheng Fu, Yang Luchan's grandson. Yang Cheng Fu was born in 1883 and quickly understood that the old way of fighting with swords and other ancient weapons was at an end. Guns were common place and even though still young at the time, he saw the demise of the Boxer Rebellion in China and knew that the writing was on the wall for traditional martial arts. But Cheng thought that Tai Chi could still have a role to play in modern China. It was common knowledge that Tai Chi masters lived a long and healthy life and he decided to promote it as a way of living. He believed that Tai Chi was a lot more than just a martial art. For Cheng, it was Tao in motion based on the natural philosophy of ancient Taoism, especially the Yin and Yang principles of the perpetually changing cycle of the universe.

Tai Chi borrows many of its techniques from Chi Kung, particularly its breathing techniques. Breathing is one of the most important aspects of Tai Chi along with the principles of Yin and Yang. In fact, in the traditional Yang long form, each stance constantly oscillates between the two states of Yin and Yang and the breathing naturally follows its never ending cycle,

Today, in China and in the rest of the world, the Yang style is by far the most popular. Unfortunately, it has also seen many changes since Yang Cheng Fu's time and all kinds of offshoots have begun to emerge, some of them little more than gentle exercise. In fact in 1956, the Chinese government who was looking for a non-western form of exercise, thought that Tai Chi might fit the bill, but they didn't like the traditional long form. They thought that it would take too long to learn and was too close to Taoism and its spiritual principles. So they created a short form of the art, removing all the difficult movements and all the breathing exercises. The Yin and Yang principles of the circulation of Chi, also used in acupuncture, were removed as well. The short form is widely used throughout the world, but it is in my opinion a poor substitute to the traditional long form.

Yet the long form has only three sections and each one can be learned independently. In fact the first section is really easy to learn. The two following ones build on it and are a little harder to master, but are not all that difficult. And like many other arts, once you master one part of it, it is up to you to learn more. But the great thing about learning even the first section of the long form, (which is in fact shorter than the short form), is that all the principles of the traditional Tai Chi still apply and all the health benefits associated with the long form can still be obtained from it.

Qi (pronounced chi)

In traditional Chinese medicine and in Taoism, Qi is the most fundamental life-force in the universe. In Japan it is called "ki," and is central to the practice of Aikido and in India it is referred as "prana" or "shakti." The ancient Egyptians might have referred to it as "ka," and the ancient Greeks as "pneuma.

In China, Qi is an integral part of the language. The literal translation of the Chinese character meaning "health" is "original Qi." The literal translation of the character for "vitality" is "high quality Qi." The translation of the character meaning "friendly" is "peaceful Qi."

Jean-Charles Crave