

T'ai Chi: A Mind/Body Healer

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Published in *Qi Journal* Autumn 2008

It's early morning and the air is cool and new. I stand in an empty soccer field, springy blades of grass forming a sea of green under my feet. Above me there's just the moon in a pale blue sky. The school building on one side of the field is flat, low, and utilitarian but the other three sides are bordered by a mix of redwoods, firs, and willows. Further away, Fickle Hill rises up to form a solid backdrop of forest to my left. I run through the traditional warm-ups and then begin the slow, circular sequence of movements that I've done most mornings for the last twenty-nine years. The fact that I'm still intrigued by this practice is proof that if you delve deeply into something, it's endlessly fascinating. T'ai Chi provides me with a chance to use my body (my state-of-the-art laboratory) to explore my physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual self. It's also good therapy because when I practice I become porous, absorbing the vitality of nature and releasing what needs to be released.

I was drawn to my first T'ai Chi class in 1979 as part of a healing program for abnormal PAP tests that had progressed to carcinoma-in-situ or "cancer-in-place." Doctors were recommending surgery, but I had a strong intuitive feeling that wasn't the way to go. I read all the medical literature I could find on the problem—both conventional and alternative—and learned that if nothing else, I had time. So I used the shotgun method. I adopted every alternative form of healing that I could fit into my life: a mostly vegetarian diet, supplements, herbs, colors, meditation, and T'ai Chi. After two years, my PAP tests were back to normal. Of course I can't say that T'ai Chi was what did it because I was using so many different therapies at once. And perhaps my body would have healed itself without any intervention on my part. But I permanently incorporated T'ai Chi and all the other therapies into my everyday life because from the beginning they made me healthier, happier, and more self-aware.

An unexpected benefit of my practice is that I save money on shoes. I used to wear my shoes out unevenly because my left leg is slightly shorter than my right. I know that T'ai Chi didn't lengthen my leg, but (also after two years) it managed to balance my body on a mysterious and profound level so that I no longer limp when I'm tired; my footfalls sound the same when I run; and I don't have to buy shoes as often because they wear out evenly. T'ai Chi gave me so much that I naturally wanted to pass it on to others. In 1989 I began teaching.

Although T'ai Chi is used primarily for health today, it started out as a martial art. The legend is that a monk in fourteenth-century China developed T'ai Chi in order to combine the yieldingness of Taoism with a hard martial art. Retreating or "disappearing" in the face of oncoming force (instead of meeting it head on) and then turning that force against one's opponent was a strategy that required less physical strength and more astuteness. Repeatedly practicing a choreographed, continuous sequence of attacking and defending movements in relaxed slow motion made it possible for a person to fully understand the minute details of each gesture and develop a solid, rooted base. T'ai Chi is still used as a martial art; its two-person form is called Push Hands. But it has also evolved over the centuries into an exercise for restoring and maintaining health and into a form of moving meditation. Starting in the nineteenth century, the art spread beyond China and today numerous styles are practiced all over the world.

T'ai Chi is a true mind/body exercise that coordinates the parts of the body with each other and the mind with the body. A central goal of T'ai Chi practice is to combine these three things: movement, breath, and visualization. This means that the whole person, on every level, is acting in harmony with herself. Each movement contains layers of content, both external and internal. The longer you practice, the more layers you uncover. The intellect is always engaged in order to navigate through the sequence; the emotions are evoked by the names and intentions of the movements; the eyes follow the body and reinforce the focused, conscious directing of energy.

Moving slowly (the slower the better) helps break through our habitual anxiety and ushers us into a peaceful, more alert state. We're able to notice and heed the tiniest movements and messages of our bodies and minds. We become acutely aware of the gradual transfer of weight from one leg to the other and thus are more surefooted. Ironically, our reflexes become faster because of the heightened awareness that comes with being calm and unhurried.

T'ai Chi is a long, sophisticated form of qigong. *Qi* means "breath" or "life force" (the energy that acupuncturists work with) and *gong* means "effort" or "work." So qigong is "breath work." Deep, slow, breaths that expand and contract the abdomen send a signal to the brain to relax, massage the internal organs, strengthen the small muscles that protect the lower back, and increase lung capacity. As the legs and arms contract (gathering energy), air is drawn in; as the legs and arms expand (delivering energy) air is expelled. The breath is fitted to every part of every movement. T'ai Chi helps us to breathe in nourishing qi and move it through our bodies without obstruction.

Everything that T'ai Chi teaches us to do with our bodies, it teaches us to do with our minds. On a physical plane, T'ai Chi promotes a relaxed, upright posture while moving forward, backward, and sideways. In other words, it teaches us not to overreach ourselves. Most of us are so used to overreaching and so chronically overextended (both emotionally and physically) that if we're

not frantic and teetering on the edge of falling, we feel as if we're not really doing anything—and we feel guilty. The fact is we can accomplish more and be happier and healthier by slowing down, staying within our own space, standing on top of our feet, and knowing our limits and respecting them.

Just as my practice brought my asymmetrical body into balance (witness the soles of my shoes), T'ai Chi has penetrated to my character and helped bring it into balance too. The sequence is composed of yin and yang, feminine and masculine, contracting and expanding, retreating and attacking. There's plenty of opportunity for practicing both modes. If you tend to be too aggressive and dominant, T'ai Chi—over time—will teach you restraint and self-control. If you tend to be too timid and deferential, it will teach you to be more self-confident and assertive. It can also help you to be discerning about which behavior is appropriate at any given time. My family was glad I took up T'ai Chi. I mellowed out.

In the last couple of decades, more and more clinical trials have been performed that document some of the benefits of T'ai Chi. Thus far, it has been shown that T'ai Chi:

- Improves balance and reduces falls
- Strengthens and increases flexibility in legs, knees, and ankles
- Elevates mood by reducing tension, depression, anger, and confusion
- Reduces stress hormones in the body
- Lowers diastolic and systolic blood pressure
- Boosts the immune system
- Increases lung capacity
- Lowers blood sugar levels for people with type 2 diabetes
- Improves circulation
- Reduces the pain and stiffness of arthritis
- Slows bone loss in postmenopausal women
- Improves quality of life for breast cancer survivors
- Is an effective therapy for cardiopulmonary rehabilitation
- Is aerobic, moderate exercise that's safe for older adults

The Arthritis Foundation uses T'ai Chi as the basis for one of its exercise programs. A number of my students have been using T'ai Chi for years to cope with chronic back pain. Trials are underway to document T'ai Chi's effects in this area too.

The advantage of using a mind/body activity like T'ai Chi is exemplified by the three ways in which it addresses osteoporosis: As a weight-bearing exercise, it slows bone loss; because T'ai Chi improves balance and reduces falls, people with fragile bones are less likely to fracture; finally, high levels of stress cause unusually high rates of bone loss and T'ai Chi lowers stress.

Learning T'ai Chi requires finding a teacher. Look for classes by calling local health clubs, community centers, and colleges. Keep an eye out for flyers on the bulletin boards at health food stores. Teachers may advertise in newspapers and be listed in the yellow pages (possibly under "martial arts").

Good teachers come in all shapes and sizes: male, female, Chinese, and non-Chinese. It's important to find a good fit between you, the style, and the teacher. Shop around—visit more than one class before enrolling. Heed your intuition. Do you feel comfortable in the class? Do the students seem to be relaxed and enthused about what they're doing? A teacher has to be a good communicator—that means having the words to explain clearly what needs to be done, and eliciting and listening carefully to feedback. He or she must be ready to modify movements for individuals to accommodate disabilities and range-of-motion limitations.

T'ai Chi is the opposite of the "no pain, no gain" approach. My policy is if anything hurts, don't do it. I've found that if people exercise the healthy parts of their bodies, the injured parts get the benefit of the increased circulation and this helps them heal. However, I do understand that students with chronic pain (usually from back problems or arthritis) often have to exercise through that pain. In these cases, it becomes even more important that the teacher keep checking in with the student about the level of pain and whether progress is being made.

I've learned how important it is for instructors to encourage students, telling them what they're doing right before telling them what they're doing wrong. As one of my favorite teachers, Dr. Paul Lam said, "A good teacher knows that the purpose of teaching is not to make the teacher feel clever, but to make the student feel clever."

Sequences range from just a few movements to over a hundred. Whether you choose a short form or a long form, it's essential to understand that it takes time to learn T'ai Chi. There's no hurry to "acquire" a form. After all these years, I'm still gaining insight into my original 97-movement style. The process of learning is never ending and the learning is the practice. I'm living proof that practicing imperfectly does not prevent someone from reaping the benefits of T'ai

Chi. It's only necessary to be persistent and consistent (not slavish) and as mindful as possible.

I ask every person who comes into my class why he or she is there. Almost all have a combination of mind and body reasons. They're stiff or hurting or their balance is bad or they'd like to become more graceful. They're also hoping to find a haven—a source of serenity and focus in their hectic, scattered lives. The quiet and slowness of T'ai Chi provide a chance to see ourselves clearly and objectively (our attributes and our flaws, both physical and mental) and gain the composure and resourcefulness to work with that raw material. We can learn patience, tolerance, and compassion for ourselves; and then turn those qualities outward toward other people and the planet. T'ai Chi brings a force for balance into an out-of-balance world. It is a ritual that connects us with ourselves and with nature. In the end, we do T'ai Chi to become better people.