TAI CHI. A Perfect Exercise For Mind And Body

By Arthur Rosenfeld

Chances are good that you have seen tai chi in a neighborhood park. You may associate it with Asian people, pacifists, or aging hippies. You may also have heard that it is good rehab for heart patients and a fine way to manage stress. Perhaps you’ve been stirred by watching people practice tai chi with a sword, and inspired by how relaxed and precise they seem. You may even have seen tai chi on television, in Hong Kong kung fu movies and their recent Western derivatives such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and *Kung Fu Panda*, or even in the cartoon series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, which draws heavily on the art. Yet for all the impressions you may have, and all the curiosity, too, you likely cannot imagine the truly transformative potential of this marvelous art.

Long ago, tai chi was a system of battlefield fighting. Today, tai chi is a perfect exercise because it conditions the body, grows the spirit, and strengthens the mind. It is also a means of personal expression for millions of people around the world, an exotic paintbrush that can produce works of art as deep, rich, surprising, and rewarding as the people who wield it. Yet tai chi is more than an art form, a physical exercise, and a wondrous lens through which to see the world; it is a philosophy that can be lived, a lifestyle through which we can realize high ideals, and a complete recipe for health, longevity, happiness, and power.

SO WHAT DOES TAI CHI LOOK LIKE?

Tai chi practice typically consists of a series of movements brought together like pearls on a string. Some people call the movements “postures,” an unfortunate word because posture is static and tai chi is dynamic; without movement, tai chi does not exist. Taken together, the movements of tai chi are referred to as a “form.” Some tai chi forms are performed slowly, others quite quickly and vigorously. Performing tai chi feels simultaneously relaxing and powerful. It leaves the player with the sense that she is moving in accordance with human structure and

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the laws of gravity, leverage, and inertia. Whether done dreamily and slowly or quickly with martial intent, tai chi embodies strong grace.

Tai chi is as much a state of mind as it is a system of movement. Demanding presence and attention to every sensation and detail, tai chi flees the moment the mind wanders. The instant we think about the pizza we’re planning to have for lunch, worry about whether the babysitter is into the wet bar, glance at the sky to track and impending thunderstorm, feel a chill in our spine about an upcoming exam or performance review, tai chi in its pure sense goes out the window. Let the mind slip away to an interlude with a lover, pop off to a happy memory of a tropical vacation or the best margarita we’ve ever tasted, and because tai chi is all about the mind/body connection, it’s gone. Return to awareness of the present moment, feel our muscles, our connective tissue, our joints and our bones, and tai chi returns. Because it requires a completely inwardly directed consciousness, genuine tai chi is not a performance and should not be done with an audience in mind.

Geometricians and physicists know that the spiral is nature’s archetypal shape, being found in galaxies, tornadoes, seashells, the flow of liquid through pipes (or blood vessels), and water exiting a drain. In recognition of this natural design, tai chi movements — particularly Chen style, the founding family’s original art — characteristically describe spirals. Spiral movement is a sign of tai chi’s Taoist origins, and accounts for the fact that many people watching tai chi say that in addition to looking exotic and graceful, the practice also appears organic and natural.

Natural, however, does not mean easy. While tai chi is adaptable to fitness levels from wheelchair-bound patients to Olympic athletes and suitable from ages 12 to 112, the art challenges us at every level. Every student soon becomes aware that every movement has onion-like layers of depth and complexity. Watching tai chi in a local park, health club, senior center, or martial arts school, it will immediately become apparent — even within a single class — which players have been at it the longest. A seasoned tai chi practitioner usually exhibits smoother move-
ments, seems more relaxed, may sink lower in his stances, and may perform
strikes with percussive authority.

The original purpose of form practice was to test martial strength and alignment
and to remain strong, rooted (more on this later), and relaxed in the kind of
unpredictable situations a real-life battle might bring. In the battlefield of every-
day life today, and with a focus on health and longevity, these beautiful move-
ments function to enhance our balance, sensitivity, serenity, composure, and
power. While the elderly and infirm player can find plenty of benefit in perform-
ing tai chi gently and in a high stance, the fittest, strongest, most flexible athlete
can crouch on one leg or go into deep and challenging stances. Form practice
coordinates upper and lower extremities at every athletic level, all the while
strengthening the body right down to the marrow.

As the tai chi onion suggests, traditional tai chi training follows a set curriculum.
Each grade, or level, requires you to be able to do certain things. At the begin-
nning, the focus is on relaxing the upper body, shifting the weight properly, and
learning arm circles and stances. As the student’s skill grows, the requirements
become more demanding, traditional Chinese weapons such as straight or curved
swords, spear, halberd, sticks, mace, and the long pole may be brought into play
to build strength, increase mobility, sensitivity, and flexibility, and improve foot-
work and timing. Simplified tai chi will not include such tools, but if you find an
advanced group at a park or martial arts school you may be lucky enough to catch
a glimpse of the art’s martial roots.

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About The Taoist Tai Chi Society Of The USA

The Taoist Tai Chi Society of the USA is part of the International Taoist Tai Chi Society, a global, volunteer organization with more than 500 locations in over 25 countries. The Society brings together people of different languages and cultures in a world-wide community.

The Taoist Tai Chi Society of the USA offers classes in Tai Chi and other internal arts of health taught by the Society’s founder, Master Moy Lin-Shin, in locations across the U.S. An 108-move form of the Taoist Tai Chi set is taught and is meant to bring your mind, body and spirit into balance, providing many health benefits.

The Taoist Tai Chi Society of the USA shares the aims and objectives of the International Taoist Tai Chi Society.

- To make Taoist Tai Chi internal arts available to all
- To promote the health-improving qualities of Taoist Tai Chi internal arts
- To promote cultural exchange
- To help others

A Charitable Organization
The Taoist Tai Chi Society of the United States of America, Inc. was incorporated as a national charitable organization in 1989. The Society was founded to preserve and promote the Taoist tradition of the dual cultivation of body and mind. In keeping with Master Moy’s vision of compassion and service to others, all instructors are nationally accredited volunteers, and most of the administrative work is done by volunteers.

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