

INSIDE TAI CHI

Hints, Tips, Training, & Process for Students and Teachers

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Introduction

A Brief History of T'ai Chi Ch'uan. The slow motion art of T'ai Chi is said by some to have been first developed by Chang San-feng during the Song dynasty (A.D. 960–1278). According to legend, as a young man Chang was scholarly and well-traveled. He studied martial arts extensively during his travels, and spent ten years training at Shaolin where he reputedly mastered all their exercises. In his later years he is said to have studied Taoist alchemy.

The exact origin of T'ai Chi Ch'uan is uncertain. One story says Chang created T'ai Chi as the result of a dream he had. Another story had Chang observing a conflict between a bird and a snake, alleging his observations served as a basis for T'ai Chi. In either case T'ai Chi certainly exemplifies principles drawn from the Taoist tradition and from the *I-Ching* (See Glossary). Quite a number of excellent books are available today detailing the origins and historical philosophy of T'ai Chi. The curious reader is referred to those many volumes currently available for more detailed information.

Since Chang's day there have evolved several different styles of T'ai Chi Ch'uan. Aside from those factors that distinguish the different styles it is true as well that individual teachers often have their own individual approaches. Though the different systems vary in ways that lend each its particular identity there are also denominators common to each. The following is a primer to familiarize the reader with the most common and beneficial aspects of traditional T'ai Chi Ch'uan.

A T'ai Chi Primer: T'ai Chi Ch'uan Explained
The T'ai Chi Classics say...
"T'ai Chi can make you Solid as a Mountain,
Supple as a Willow, and Fluid as a Great River."

In today's high tech world even the most basic of our needs have become conspicuously dependent on technological gadgets of one sort or another. Activities as simple as walking or running call for special shoes, pulse monitors, or treadmills (even the lower end models being fully computerized for maximum convenience). In refreshing contrast to this state of affairs we are gifted with the ancient art of T'ai Chi Ch'uan. No designer lycra outfits, no digital things, no rackets, bells, or whistles...T'ai Chi is decidedly low tech.



Snake Creeps Down

T'ai Chi Ch'uan is the most widely practiced martial art/health care system in the world today. In China, millions of people commit to beginning each day with its practice. This is due largely to the fact that T'ai Chi is understood to offer those who practice it a range of benefits for mind, body and soul.

At this time, as we embark on a new millennium, T'ai Chi has become firmly rooted in our own western culture as well. Only recently have organized studies begun to explore the reputed health benefits of T'ai Chi. Yet, centuries of empirical evidence lay claim to T'ai Chi's efficacy as a health care and wellness modality. In China, T'ai Chi has typically been indicated for a wide range of chronic illnesses, including, but not limited to:

1. Back or knee problems
2. Hypertension and other stress related issues
3. Circulatory system disorders
4. Nervous system disorders
5. Addictions
6. Arthritis
7. Asthma
8. Mental illness

Tai Chi's application in addressing medical issues such as these remains largely untapped here in the west. Nevertheless, there is little question that T'ai Chi has a great deal to offer, and if the growing number of medical studies citing T'ai Chi for its wide-ranging benefits are any indication of this, then western science and medicine are starting to sit up and take notice.

Today almost everyone has had some exposure to T'ai Chi via the various media. Film clips or documentaries on China often depict (albeit briefly) groups

of people practicing early morning T'ai Chi exercises. In China, the parks and waterfronts are full of people who begin each day with this healthy slow-motion routine. The Chinese regard T'ai Chi as an official exercise and as a national treasure. The effective manner in which it contributes to their vast population's wellness and reputed vitality is so important for a country historically lacking in sophisticated medical resources.

T'ai Chi made its first great leap forward into the American stream of consciousness back in 1993, with Bill Moyers' critically acclaimed PBS series "*Healing and the Mind*." Since that time, T'ai Chi's growth in America has been exponential. Yet, a clear understanding of the purpose and intricacies of this ancient art remains elusive, even for teachers experienced in other fields of martial arts, let alone for the average layperson. T'ai Chi is like the proverbial iceberg in that there is more to it than meets the eye.

By way of explanation, "T'ai Chi Ch'uan" is a generic term. There are several different styles of T'ai Chi popularly practiced. Common to each of the different T'ai Chi systems is a slow motion movement routine. Beyond that the differences depend on the teacher with whom you speak. But one thing that T'ai Chi emphatically is not is slowed down Karate or Kung Fu. The principles of genuine T'ai Chi differ fundamentally from those of harder style martial arts. T'ai Chi as a martial art maintains its own autonomy.

Although T'ai Chi's benefits are wide-ranging and not limited to those listed below, I understand its practice to be of particular value in four regards:

1. The cultivation of Ch'i, or life force energy
2. Exercising and conditioning the body on a very deep level
3. Learning to understand and apply the inner structure of the body
4. Learning to be focused in the moment.

These four areas are pretty much all encompassing. Any of T'ai Chi's other benefits can arguably be assigned to one of these categories. Some of these ideas may seem a bit foreign and difficult to grasp at first, but concealed within these concepts is the magic that T'ai Chi has to offer. It is however, the actual living of these principles that enables the T'ai Chi practitioner to experience renewed health and well-being on all levels. T'ai Chi students may also experience the feeling of being more integrated both with themselves and with their environment. It is the living of these principles that serves as the focal point for this book. [A fifth and separate equally important regard that begs mention, but which I will not address in detail in this book, is T'ai Chi's application as a fighting art.]

Life Force Energy, or Ch'i, is what animates humans as individual living beings. T'ai Chi Ch'uan exerts a gentle balance on one's life force (Ch'i) energy, and promotes improved health and longevity, and an enhanced quality of life. Cultivating a practical understanding and reservoir of Ch'i for self-healing or for martial arts purposes entails a very specialized approach that is best learned from

others, who are already knowledgeable in such practice.

T'ai Chi body conditioning is unique in how it simultaneously challenges and addresses the needs of body and mind. Slow, gentle, and continuous, T'ai Chi stretching increases the body's range of motion while improving muscle and soft tissue tone and resilience. This manifests on a level deep enough to begin to counter the long-term effects of chronic stress/tension/pain that many people carry. After just a few months of practice, T'ai Chi students often find themselves able to enjoy activities and a freedom of movement thought long lost.

The inner structure of T'ai Chi refers to the anatomically correct alignment of the skeletal frame and connective tissues. Advanced level T'ai Chi is quite precise and entails an exact, often frustratingly subtle, positioning of the body's various components. The bones, tendons, and ligaments must be aligned "just so" in order to facilitate a mechanical advantage in movement or stillness. This can take quite some time to master, but once grasped the benefits of improved posture, rooting, and economy of motion become self-evident.

Finally, we are learning to be in the moment. As simple as this sounds it is probably the concept most challenging to the average westerner. From the moment we wake up each day each of us is deluged with a barrage of sensual stimuli. We often find ourselves preoccupied with the world around us. We spend the greater part of our waking time, and all too often our sleeping time as well, dealing with it, buying it, selling it, wearing it, listening to it, eating it, watching it, and otherwise trying to secure it for ourselves, or trying to secure our place in it.

T'ai Chi teaches us that there is another world, equally vast, and equally important...the world within.

In Taoism it is said that whatever is outside is also inside. If we spend our lives speeding down the highway, how much will we miss at life's roadside? The slow motion approach of T'ai Chi doesn't just allow, but rather compels, an enhanced state of self-awareness. T'ai Chi Ch'uan students learn to cultivate two important concomitant states, those of attention and intention, combining them into an inseparable "One". This facilitates personal clarity and allows us to proceed through life in a more conscious, deliberate, and enriching manner. As such, these are important "ingredients" in evolving towards better health and towards a sense of feeling more fully integrated as human beings.

As appealing as all this may sound, the real challenge is to do it right, because practicing incorrectly will fail to produce the full range of desired results. In order to learn T'ai Chi well, and derive all the aforementioned benefits, one must have a suitable guide and be prepared to commit to regular practice. T'ai Chi Ch'uan is indeed delightful to watch. Even just observing someone practice the T'ai Chi form can induce a feeling of calm and wonder. But that which is truly important in T'ai Chi is typically beyond the casual observer's perceptive abilities. It is the internal experience of T'ai Chi which is so valuable and which can prove so elusive.