

Tai Chi - The Gentle Art Of Movement

I first saw tai chi at midnight in an empty New York school playground. My cousin had taken me to China Town for a meal, and walking back to her car, we saw these shadowy, graceful figures that looked like some ghostly ballet. She explained that this regular ritual was for all the Chinese restaurant workers in the district.

We stood watching for ages and I was hypnotized by these silent, gentle movements that had an extraordinary sense of strength and power. I have been a fan since that magical midnight encounter and advised many patients to take up this ancient Chinese martial art. In all the 30 years since, I have never seen an injury caused by tai chi and have found it a great form of rehab and recovery for back problems, arthritis, sports injuries, breathing problems and general wellbeing. Sometimes described as "meditation in motion" because it promotes serenity through gentle movements, this is an excellent aid to control stress.



According to the World renowned Mayo Clinic, Tai chi, is a noncompetitive, self-paced system of gentle physical exercise and stretching. To do tai chi, you perform a series of postures or movements in a slow, graceful manner. Each posture flows into the next without pause, ensuring that your body is in constant motion.

There are over 100 movements and positions, many named after animals or nature. The rhythmic patterns of movement are linked to breathing so bringing inner calm and intense concentration that pushes aside all negative and distressing thoughts.

From 8 to 80 or more, anyone can enjoy Tai Chi. You do not need to buy special clothes, shoes or equipment; you can do it indoors or out and in groups or alone; it's your choice. I think it is probably the best form of exercise for those of you who have done nothing active for years because it is so gentle and unlikely to tear muscles or strain tendons.

Because it is weight bearing, this activity is perfect for anyone with osteoporosis as it will help strengthen bones without risking fractures.

It is the combination of mind and body that helps reduce stress and encourage a state of calm and relaxation. Stress, anxiety and tension just melt away and you will have reduced blood pressure too, for hours after you enjoy your sessions.

The Mayo Clinic experts suggest that tai chi may offer numerous benefits beyond stress reduction, including:

- Reducing anxiety and depression
- Improving balance, flexibility and muscle strength
- Reducing falls in older adults
- Improving sleep quality
- Lowering blood pressure
- Improving cardiovascular fitness in older adult
- Relieving chronic pain
- Increasing energy, endurance and agility
- Improving overall feelings of well-being

Wondering where to go from here? I hope so. There are plenty of books and DVDs, but there is no substitute for a good teacher. Learning the basics and the encouragement of a class of other people is the foundation stone to help you acquire the skills. After you have mastered the essentials you can enjoy your own work outs whenever you have the time and place.

Many of you may be discovering Tai Chi for the first time and would like to know more about what is actually taught and practised in classes so your first port of call should be:

The Tai Chi Union For Great Britain www.taichiunion.com

Of course you will benefit from a few weeks of tai chi classes, but just as with any form of exercise, you will continue to reap the benefits if you carry on longer and make regular sessions a routine part of your day to day life. Like all skills, practice makes perfect.