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Tai Chi for Health and Balance

I'll always remember my visits to San Francisco and passing groups of older adults in the parks, practicing Tai Chi. Just watching them brought peace, and you could tell they were entirely involved in their activity. It has always interested me, but I have to admit I have yet to experience it. However, just recently, at a Mindful Eating workshop, we did 'purposeful walking', taking very slow and controlled steps 'with intention'. We could feel every single muscle working as we minutely and consciously lifted a foot, moved it forward, and placed it in front of the other one. This reminded me of what Tai Chi might be like.

But what is Tai Chi, why do people practice it, and can anyone do it?

Tai Chi was originally a deadly art, guarded by a few families and used for killing. Traditionalists believe that it is important for students of this ancient art to remember its roots, because the techniques of relaxation and breath control were developed for the express purpose of injuring the opponent in an efficient, scientific manner.

Today, of course, we no longer need to practice this martial art for the purpose of killing our enemy. However, some say that now we can use this practice to fight the enemy of fatigue, stress, overwork or lack of understanding of oneself and one's body. Daily practice of Tai Chi promotes mental clarity and a healthy body, assists with balance and helps the circulation of the blood.

Someone doing Tai Chi (pronounced "tie chee") will move slowly and gently, while breathing and meditating. This is why it is sometimes called "moving meditation". Many practitioners believe that Tai Chi helps the flow throughout the body of a proposed vital energy called qi (pronounced "chee," it means "air," "puff," or "power"). In the United States, Tai Chi for health purposes is part of complementary and alternative medicine, or CAM. People who practice Tai Chi do so to improve their health, yet it is not fully known what changes occur in the body during Tai Chi, and whether it does, in fact, influence health.

Over the years, several styles and variations have been developed. Taoist Tai Chi was introduced to the US by Master Moy Lin-shin, which emphasizes more elongating and stretching movements. Tai Chi Chuan is descended from the Lang family, but has several family variations. Someone who does Tai Chi for health moves in a slow and relaxed and graceful way, either on one's own or in a group. These movements make up forms (or routines). Some movements are named for animals or birds. The simplest style of Tai Chi uses 13 movements, while more complex styles can use dozens – Taoist Tai Chi has 108 basic moves. Each of these movements flows into the next. The whole body is in motion, with movements performed gently and at the same speed. It is important to keep the body upright.

Like other CAM approaches, there are aspects of Tai Chi which everyone does not agree. Since there is little known scientifically about it, accepting its teachings is a matter of faith rather than evidence-based science. Also, in addition to more traditional styles, some blends of Tai Chi styles have evolved, such as those mentioned above. This creates a differing of opinion of which styles represent “true” Tai Chi.

Other important elements in Tai Chi are breathing and meditation. It is important to concentrate, breathe in a deep and relaxed manner. The benefits of this breathing and meditation include massaging the internal organs, helping with the exchange of gases in the lungs, helping the digestive system, increasing calmness and improving balance.

Health benefits of Tai Chi:

People practice Tai Chi for several health reasons, such as:

- **To gain benefits from exercise.** It is a low-impact form of exercise. It’s also weight-bearing, which is beneficial to the bones. Additionally, it is an aerobic form of exercise.
- **To improve muscle strength, coordination, and flexibility.**
- **To improve balance.** To have a lower risk for falls, beneficial for the elderly.
- **To ease arthritis pain and stiffness.**
- **For health benefits from the meditation.**
- **To improve sleep and overall wellness.**

Although Tai Chi for health is considered a safe practice, it is always recommended to check with your healthcare provider before beginning any type of exercise.

Here are some things to keep in mind:

- If your body is improperly positioned while doing Tai Chi, you could not only end up with sore muscles, but even sprains.
- Instructors recommend not practicing Tai Chi after eating, when tired, or when you are ill.
- Caution should be used if you have any of these conditions: Pregnancy, hernia, joint problems, back pain, sprains, fractures or osteoporosis.

In the US, people do not have to be health professionals or licensed to practice or teach Tai Chi. It is not regulated by state or Federal governments and there is no standard training for Tai Chi teachers. If you are considering learning Tai Chi, ask about your teacher’s training and experience. Learning Tai Chi from a teacher is encouraged over learning from videos or books. This will help you to know if you are practicing the movements safely and correctly.

The idea that sickness and disease arise out of imbalances in a vital energy field is part of some other CAM (complementary and alternative medicine) therapies, such as Reiki and homeopathy.

Within CAM, Tai Chi is a type of mind-body medicine. Mind-body medicine focuses on the interactions among the brain, body, mind and behavior, and the ways in which emotional, mental, social, spiritual and behavioral factors affect health.

More information on Tai Chi, and NCCAM-Funded Research on Tai Chi, can be found at the NCCAM (National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine) website at <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/taichi/>.

Tai Chi has been around for centuries, but practicing it as a healing activity is relatively new. If it's something you have ever had an interest in, find someone educated in the practice and give it a try! I'll look forward to seeing you out in the park one day, totally focused on balancing your qi.

Marjorie Geiser helps people overcome their confusion and distress they may feel when trying to add healthy eating and fitness into their busy lives. One specialty is working with people who suffer from food sensitivities, helping them overcome various health conditions caused by reactive foods. She is a Registered Dietitian, Personal Trainer and Life Coach, offering services locally and globally. To learn more about her services, go to her website at www.megfit.com or email her at margie@megfit.com.