

Tai Chi for Health

AS AN AID TO ARTHRITIS

BY DR. PAUL LAM | ISSUE 14, AUTUMN 2001

Dr. Paul Lam, a family physician in Australia for 26 years, he is a respected Tai Chi teacher. Dr. Lam has created several Tai Chi programs that have helped to improve people's health and lifestyle. Over the past several years, Dr. Lam has been conducting workshops with a Tai Chi arthritis program worldwide.

Introduction

Some tai chi practitioners argue about what is more important, martial arts or health. I believe this does not matter so much because to be good at either purpose we need to train the same components. To be effective in martial arts, you need to have a clear mind to assess the situation calmly, a strong stance and good balance. You also need to understand the principles of yielding and advancing at the right time. You need to be strong from within, have strong qi and you need to be fitter and have stronger muscles, etc. The same components are essential for better health, calmer mind, understanding the principle of balance, understanding the idea of yielding and advancing.

Historical background

Yang Lu-Chan changed the original Chen style Tai Chi Chuan into Yang style. Yang style has higher stances, is slow, gentle and graceful. It has eliminated the more difficult, fast and forceful delivering movements; punching, jumping in the air, of the original Chen style. For whatever reason, Yang Lu-Chan changed the Tai Chi Chuan from an exclusively martial arts practice to one dedicated to a great health exercise. Since Yang style was created, the other styles such as Wu, Hao and Sun styles, followed suit in that they are all similar in terms of being gentle, relaxing and suitable for most people to learn for health. Naturally, all styles are still retaining their martial art disciples, but these styles are also more suitable for health purposes only.

The fact that Tai Chi is so popular is largely due to the health aspect. In my experience 99% of practitioners and students are practicing Tai Chi for health purposes. So, for whatever reason we're practicing Tai Chi, we don't need to practice it any differently for health or martial arts except for serious martial art purposes, sparring is regarded as essential by many. But sparring can carry a higher chance of injury risk.

I also believe that the more people practice tai

chi, the more it will improve the general level of proficiency, knowledge and depth of the art. For example, years ago, basketball was not so popular, the huge popularity improves its techniques and skill immensely. I believe this can happen with Tai Chi. The future of Tai Chi in the 21st-century could rely on its almost magical ability to improve health.

How does it work for health?

Most experts agree that a good exercise program should contain three components. They are flexibility or range of motion, muscular strengthening and fitness. There are many scientific studies that have proven Tai Chi improves all these. For example, the *Atlanta FAICSIT group (reducing frailty and falls in older persons: an investigation of tai chi and computerized balance training*, J Am Geriat Soc. 1996 May; 44 (5):489-97.) conducted an exciting study using a prospective, randomized, controlled clinical trial which is considered the gold standard of medical research methods. The study evaluated the effects of two exercise approaches, Tai Chi (TC), and computerized balance training (BT) and looked at biomedical aspects (strength, flexibility, cardiovascular endurance, body composition), functional components, psychosocial indicators of frailty and the occurrence of falls. The results indicated that TC intervention could impact favorably on defined biomedical and psychosocial indices of frailty (muscular strength, flexibility and balance), as well as a massive 47.5% decrease upon the occurrence of falls.

Apart from these three essential components, Tai Chi has many other positive effects on the body:

Better posture: Many doctors believe that correct body posture will less inappropriate wear to joints and muscles. When your posture is upright, the long space is larger (try to take a big breath and straighten your chest, you will notice there is more space in the chest). The body functions better in an upright posture.

A stooped body and drooping shoulders often associate with sadness, fear and negative emotion. Try to assume such a posture and you will most likely start having negative feelings. Whereas in an upright, powerful but supple posture, you will find it difficult to be depressed and negative. Right posture leads to positive feeling or positive mental state that can, in turn, improve physical body.



throughout the body, performing many functions to maintain good health. The stronger your qi, the healthier and stronger you are.

The concept of qi has been a basic belief in most Eastern cultures for thousands of years. Acupuncture and Chinese medicine base their central theory on this concept. The word gong means an exercise that requires a great

The power of the mind: There are many studies demonstrating the amazing power of the mind controlling the body. Tai Chi integrates body and mind, using conscious mind to direct the internal force and the internal force to direct each movement. When practicing Tai Chi one focuses on all movements and the coordination of the body. The mental training in Tai Chi will enhance clarity of the mind, improve relaxation and uplift the mood. A recent review done by doctors from Stanford University (Luskin, FM, Newall, KA, Griffith, M, et al.(1998). 'A review of mind-body therapies in the treatment of cardiovascular disease: Part 1. 'Altern Ther. Health Med. May; 4(3) 46-61.) on complementary and alternative treatments concludes that mind-body techniques (including Tai Chi) were found to be efficacious primarily as complementary and sometimes as stand-alone alternative treatments.

Clearly the immense power of the mind has not been fully estimated. As one of the most powerful mind-body exercises, Tai Chi teaches the student to be mindful of the intrinsic energy from which he or she can achieve greater self-control and empowerment.

The power of Chi: In Chinese, qi means several things; the most common meaning of qi is air. Here in the context of Tai Chi, qi is the life energy inside a person. This life energy comes from the combination of three things: the air breathed in through the lungs, essential qi from the kidney and the qi absorbed from food and water through the digestive system. Qi circulates

deal of time to become proficient. Qi gong is the practice to cultivate qi. Qigong is essentially a breathing exercise sometimes aided by certain body movements and meditation at the same time. Tai Chi is also called meditation in motion having incorporating qigong as an integral component. The gentle and slow movements stretch one's energy channels and keep them strong and supple; the rhythmic movements of the muscle, spine and joints pumps energy through the whole body. Tai Chi is one of the most effective exercises for qi cultivation.

There are many reasons Tai Chi works so well in promoting health and fitness. It is a pleasurable exercise that is almost addictive, it is cheap to learn and you don't need any expensive equipment. You can practice Tai Chi almost anywhere. It has so much depth and diversity that almost anyone can find a form or style that suit him or her.

A specially designed program –'Tai Chi for Arthritis'

A designed program has many advantages, 'Tai Chi for Arthritis' is simple, easy to learn and yet it is powerfully effective in healing arthritis. It is also safe if practiced properly. I worked with a group of rheumatologists (arthritis specialists) and Tai Chi instructors to compose the 12-movement program based on Sun style. It is officially endorsed by the Arthritis Foundation of Australia. The program includes exercises for arthritis, warm-up and wind-down exercises, a qigong exercise for relaxation, and three levels of difficulty.