



Health & Fitness

Tai Chi Ch'uan for Health



Like a new shoot growing up through the soil and unfolding—that is what comes to mind when watching one of the many Tai Chi forms flow into another—a sense of energizing rebirth illustrated through body movement. Strength, nourishment, growth, energy - all these words seem applicable to the experience of Tai Chi.

Tai Chi Ch'uan, the "Supreme Ultimate Force," originated centuries ago in China, an outgrowth of the principles of Taoism. Taoism stresses the importance of balance and harmony for health, because things which are balanced and in harmony are at peace. The yin and yang, the opposing, yet complementary, forces found in all natural things, work together in perpetual balance. The effectiveness of Tai Chi lies in its series of exercise movements which are equally balanced between yin and yang.

Some of the potential benefits experienced by practitioners of Tai Chi may include the following: increased flexibility and coordination, increased core strength and stability, lowered blood pressure, improved posture and body alignment, weight loss, mood elevation, balance of inner energy (this promotes improved metabolic efficiency and enhanced immune response), improved circulation, relaxation/stress reduction, and increased capacity for concentration.

Five major styles of Tai Chi exist: Chen style, the oldest style, which employs combat techniques and explosive power similar to other martial arts; Yang style, the most popular style, soft but powerful, promotes good health; Hao style, with an emphasis on inner power; Wu style features a complexity of hand techniques and focuses on redirecting incoming force; and Sun style, the most recently developed style of Tai Chi, a flowing style good for healing and relaxation which incorporates a substantial amount of Qi Gong for focused and functional breathing.

Akiko Okada, Tai Chi instructor at the Rush-Copley Healthplex in Aurora predominantly employs the Yang style for her Aqua Chi classes, which meet once a week on land and twice in the water, and the gentler Sun style for her Tai Chi for Arthritis class. (Akiko holds a M.S. in Exercise Physiology and is certified by the Arthritis Foundation). Some of Akiko's students take both classes, seizing the opportunity to practice under her direction as much as possible. Recently, participants at the Healthplex benefited from the expertise of Akiko's parents, Fumio and Toshiko Okada, who were visiting from Japan. They led Akiko's classes, presenting new forms for them to add to those already mastered.

Akiko's students seemed delighted with the opportunity to learn from Fumio and Toshiko, but their true gratitude and enthusiasm is directed at Akiko, herself, for opening them up to this gentle yet powerful exercise that has proved so beneficial for them. One student, who underwent gastric bypass surgery six months ago, commented, "Those of us with health problems are always surrounded by things we can't do—this we can do—and it works!" Another student, a 78 year-old cardiac patient said, "This energizes me and I can get out of my chair now without help!" A diabetic student explained why Tai Chi works for her by saying, "Diabetics need to exercise and increase circula-

tion, but they need to keep their stress level down at the same time." Another student battling lupus and rheumatoid arthritis praises Tai Chi for the personal results that she perceives: "I get a calming sense after taking class, relaxed and de-stressed." "We're always learning new things...perfecting and concentrating," said another who appreciated the mental involvement and focusing quality of Tai Chi, as well as the physical aspects.

According to the testimonials of these health-challenged students, as well as those of many other students and long-time practitioners, Tai Chi is a total body tonic, as appropriate and beneficial for the de-conditioned as it is for the fit individual. Calming, yet invigorating, the traditional art of Tai Chi appeals to those who seek to balance mind, body, and spirit for health promotion and personal growth.

For more information about Tai Chi, contact Akiko Okada at 630-978-4865, extension 8150, email akiko@okadanet.net or contact the American Tai Chi Association at 13130 Thornapple Place, Herndon, VA 20171 or email: contact@americantaichi.net

[Always consult your doctor regarding the applicability of any opinions or recommendations with respect to your symptoms or medical condition.]