

INSTRUCTOR'S POINT OF VIEW

HEALTH BENEFITS IN TAI CHI

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Among the Chinese martial arts, there are two basic types: Waijia Chuan (external martial arts) and Neijia Chuan (internal martial arts). Examples of external martial arts are Kung Fu (or Wushu) and Wing Chun. Tai Chi, Bagua, and Xing Yi are considered internal martial arts. Even though these arts were generated from different places at different times, each has its own unique principles and ways of training.

Although quite different from one another, the internal styles share the same basic principles. Some of the basic principles are: a) heightened awareness of one's posture and structure; b) release of tension; c) the development of "root" where the body is rooted into ground through the feet to enable movement and generate power; d) the development of an internal peace and calm emotional state and e) sinking of the Qi (chi) where the center of gravity is lowered to assist the movement of energy. Sinking the Qi refers to using our breath to help relax the body and calm the mind.⁽¹¹⁾ Qi is the substance that flows in the body and is the compelling force for all activities.

Internal Martial Arts are essentially entrenched in Qi work and the internal power. Qi can be experienced in many ways. It can be experienced through warmth and/or tingling feeling in the hands. It can be experienced by feeling light on your feet. Throughout one's practice, Qi may be experienced in a myriad of ways. The goal is to ensure that Qi is not blocked in the body.

Among the Internal styles, Tai Chi is the most popular. The Chinese characters for Tai Chi or Tai Chi Chuan can be translated as the 'Supreme Ultimate Fist'. The notion of 'supreme ultimate' is often associated with the Chinese concept of yin-yang, the notion that one can see a dynamic duality (e.g. male/female, active/passive, dark/light, forceful/yielding, etc.) in all things.⁽¹⁰⁾ Tai Chi is a Chinese martial art that is primarily practiced for its health benefits. Tai Chi emphasizes complete relaxation, and is essentially a form of moving meditation. Tai Chi is characterized by soft, slow, flowing movements that emphasize Qi, rather than brute strength. Qi can flow through the body when Tai Chi movements and postures are performed correctly. Tai Chi can also be used for self-defense; as the proper shapes for the transmission of energy, the methods of weight shifts, techniques of relaxation and breath control can be expressed in combat.

According to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and research performed by major institutes such as Harvard University, Oxford University, Stanford University and Tufts Medical Center; Tai Chi can improve a person's health. Tai Chi can sharpen your mental focus by building your concentration and exercising your memory, strengthen the joints and improve joint flexibility, improve balance and posture, improve circulation and boost the immune system.⁽³⁾ I would like to focus on the health benefits of Tai Chi.

Case studies that demonstrate the benefits of Tai Chi

Researchers at Tufts Medical Center performed a systematic review of the effects of Tai Chi on psychological well-being. They reviewed the effects of Tai Chi on stress, anxiety, depression, mood disturbance and self-esteem. The analysis found significant reductions in stress, anxiety and depression as well as enhanced mood. Several studies also showed positive effects on self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Although self-esteem and self-efficacy are not a health outcome in and of themselves; they are often associated directly with healthy behaviors and with psychological health.⁽¹⁾

Another research study performed by the American Journal of Health Promotion concluded that bone loss was delayed and numbers of fractures were less among postmenopausal women practicing Tai Chi. Bone mineral density increased for women following Tai Chi exercises as compared to no-exercise controls. Current research suggests a favorable effect on bone health for those practicing Tai Chi.⁽²⁾

In a 2006 study published by Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine, Stanford University researchers reported benefits of Tai Chi in 39 women and men, average age 66, with below-average fitness and at least one cardiovascular risk factor. After taking 36 Tai Chi classes in 12 weeks, they showed improvement in both lower-body strength (measured by the number of times they could rise from a chair in 30 seconds) and upper-body strength (measured by their ability to do arm curls). Also, women in the 2006 Stanford study significantly boosted upper- and lower-body flexibility as well as strength.⁽⁸⁾

Additional studies in Japan used the same strength measures, 113 older adults were assigned to different 12-week exercise programs, including Tai Chi, brisk walking, and resistance training. People who did Tai Chi improved more than 30% in lower-body strength and 25% in arm strength almost as much as those who participated in resistance training, and more than those assigned to brisk walking.⁽⁸⁾

"Although you aren't working with weights or resistance bands, the unsupported arm exercise involved in Tai Chi strengthens your upper body," says internist Dr. Gloria Yeh, an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School. Tai chi strengthens both the lower and upper extremities and also the core muscles of the back and abdomen.⁽⁸⁾

Tai Chi has become an increasingly recognized preventive and rehabilitative therapeutic tool by the conventional medical community. Recent studies have begun to suggest that Tai Chi can be used as a therapeutic intervention for a variety of health concerns including: balance and postural stability, musculoskeletal strength and flexibility, hypertension, immune function and general stress management.⁽⁵⁾

The findings from numerous studies are positive for a wide range of health benefits associated with Tai Chi. The strongest, most consistent evidence is demonstrated for effects on bone health, respiratory fitness, some aspects of physical function, quality of life, self-efficacy, and factors related to falls prevention.⁽²⁾

Due to the growing population of middle age and senior citizens, Tai Chi is growing in popularity as health benefits are proven through research. However, the instructor is the most important factor for the student's success and achievement. The instructor should have the ability to convey what Tai Chi has to offer as well as the acumen to properly explain the principles of Tai Chi to their students. Ultimately incorporating these principles as well as all of the internal and external postures and energies creates a sound foundation for Tai Chi practice that leads to better health and is essential in avoiding injuries.

Health benefits relate back to the students

As a Tai Chi instructor, I am grateful for the research and medical studies that support the benefits associated with Tai Chi. These studies helped promote Tai Chi as a useful tool for improving one's health. My Tai Chi classes are structured to incorporate techniques and strategies that will promote health benefits and wellness. I work on whole body awareness, flexibility and developing the student's self-confidence. I work on developing proper posture and opening of the "Kua" to reduce lower back and hip pain. The Kua is the connecting joint between our upper body and lower body (i.e. pelvic area).⁽¹³⁾ I employ positive reinforcement, a strong foundation of skills and strengthening exercises to help with balance. I use resistance training and other weight-bearing exercises to help maintain bone density and medical qigong techniques to improve breathing and circulation. I would modify the class when necessary to fit each student's individual needs, condition and/or abilities. For more complex Tai Chi routines, I would implement the eight energies and six harmonies to work on body alignment and mind focus.

While my students experience varying depths of Tai Chi benefits, Caroline Dacey in particular has experienced very encouraging results. Caroline has been studying Tai Chi with me for almost three years. When Caroline started, she had difficulties with her energy levels, circulation, flexibility, balance and strength. She also was diagnosed with low bone density and her stress levels were high due past traumatic events. She had tried other treatments, but Tai Chi offered her hope.

When we practice Tai Chi, we focus on slow normal breathing techniques and relaxing the body. These breathing techniques can help cleanse the body of stagnant energy and replace it with positive healing energy. Through proper breathing, we can improve our lung capacity which promotes circulation of oxygen in the blood.⁽⁴⁾ One of the critical factors in increasing circulation is the continuous repetition of the Tai Chi movement.

To prepare Caroline for the complex movements in the Yang Tai Chi form, we improved her balance and root by practicing the Golden Rooster stance on a stability ball. We emphasized sinking which allows the body to settle by relaxing the hips and waist. We worked on controlling our breathing to loosen the muscles and ligaments. This type of training helped Caroline perform the Snake Creeps Down movement (i.e. Squatting Single Whip). In my opinion, Snake Creeps Down is one of the most difficult movements in the Yang Tai Chi form.

After sixteen months, Caroline was able to complete her level 1 Tai Chi exam and she was confident enough to compete in her first Tai Chi tournament. She competed and placed in Tai Chi sword and the simplified Tai Chi form. Figure 1 below shows Caroline performing Brush Knee Twist Step from Yang Tai Chi form.



Figure 1:

It may take a few months to feel the effects and health benefits of Tai Chi. But when you do, it can lead you to a new lifestyle and a different way of thinking. "Once people start feeling better, they often become more active in their daily life," says Dr. Karim Khan, a family-practice and sports physician at the University of British Columbia.⁽¹⁴⁾

Conclusion

The research and case studies have been proven as Caroline experienced the health benefits from Tai Chi. Caroline states that the impacts of Tai Chi on her strength, concentration and energy levels were noticeable. "I feel more alert, more focused and more relaxed. I'm stronger in my legs and my balance has improved. There were times when I would go home after work very tried and with low energy. After Tai Chi class, I would feel so much better. Tai Chi would put me in a better all-around mood."

In addition to the benefits Caroline has experienced, research has shown that Tai Chi can improve bone density, improve joint and muscle flexibility, increase balance, strengthen the immune system and reduce stress. If you are a beginner or an advanced practitioner, it is important to consider how you can attain the benefits from Tai Chi. You should set goals, commit to practice and work towards achieving those goals. Tai Chi offers the practitioner the opportunity to greatly improve their well-being.

About the author

Karim-Ben Saunders has been studying various martial arts since the 1980s. Starting with Tae Kwon Do, he gravitated towards Kung Fu and Tai Chi in the early 1990s. Since 1997, he has dedicated himself towards studying Tai Chi and other internal martial arts such as Bagua, Xing Yi and Wuji. He has sought masters far and wide in his search for knowledge. In his search, he has trained locally with Master Narcyz Latecki at Chinese Martial Arts, a division of Athletic Balance, as well as abroad in Hong Kong with Master William Ng.

He has competed in and won gold medals in Tai Chi, Tai Chi Sword, Push Hands, Wushu and XingYi at national and international tournaments. With his experience, Karim-Ben hopes to promote his enthusiasm of internal martial arts and the development of inner clarity and harmony of body, energy and consciousness.

Karim-Ben is currently the head instructor at Full Circle Tai Chi and Qigong, a member of the International Wushu Sanshou Dao Association, a certified Tai Chi Instructor and a certified New England Tai Chi Tournament Judge.

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