

BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO TAI CHI CHUAN TRAINING

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WHAT IS TAI CHI CHUAN

Since you've decided to try Tai Chi for whatever reason such as health and fitness, self-defense, or because you always wanted to get into martial arts, or all the above, I created this training guide to support your initial efforts.



What is Tai Chi?

Tai Chi is a great health & fitness exercise, self-defense, and a martial art all at the same time. Tai Chi is typically abbreviated for Tai Chi Chuan which means Grand Ultimate Fists.

Tai Chi Chuan is considered one of several “internal” martial arts where the focus is on developing harmony between the mind and body. Breathing, posture, relaxation and coordinated movements are practiced throughout the training sessions to develop good balance in both body and mind.

The practice of Tai Chi includes many known health improvement activities that most don't know about. A routine Tai Chi Chuan training session includes stretching, deep breathing, meditation, mindfulness, and physical exercise. All these activities in themselves have been shown to be beneficial for health and wellness. In the next section, there will be information on the various beneficial elements in more detail.



TAI CHI CHUAN CLASS DESCRIPTION

The intention of this section is to thoroughly describe what takes place during Tai Chi Chuan training and how the various elements of a typical Tai Chi training session can impact the holistic wellness of the practitioner. The format of Tai Chi class along with a description of Tai Chi as exercise, meditation, mindfulness, breath work, and stretching will be provided.

Taijiquan is done very slowly. The form is slow because of the need to change deep aspects of physical and mental development.

TAI CHI CLASS FORMAT

The following is a standard protocol for a one-hour Tai Chi Chuan class session:

1. Qigong Exercise – Qigong is a mind-body exercise form that uses meditation, breathing, and movement to increase energy and enable the body to heal itself. The exercise and healing techniques were developed in ancient China and Tibet. It is practiced for a variety of reasons and has countless health-related benefits. The following is a typical set of Qigong exercises: Ba Duan Jin (aka, The Eight Brocades) (see Appendix A). Ba Duan Jin is an ancient practice to help warm up the body and focus the mind. Ba Duan Jin will be practiced every session of Tai Chi to help participants learn the postures and corresponding breathing methods.
2. Yang Style 8 Tai Chi Training – Yang Style 8 Tai Chi Chuan training will consist of learning the entire form movement by movement. Each movement will be practiced during each training session. The main goal is for students to learn the entire form to be able to practice on their own as a daily part of a personal exercise routine.

Since the typical Tai Chi class is an ‘open’ class where each student is at their own learning level, e.g., first class beginner to experienced practitioner, each will

be afforded the opportunity to practice what they have learned with guidance from the instructor.

3. Qigong Training: Each Tai Chi class will include an additional qigong practice utilizing Hua Tuo's Frolics of the Five Animals, in which one imitates the actions of tigers, deer, bears, apes, and birds.
4. Stationary Meditation (5 minutes) - This is the final practice of each Tai Chi session. One form of breathing meditation e.g., Four Gates Breathing, Circle Breathing, Diaphragmatic Breathing, or Yin Yang Breathing etc. is used for approximately five minutes to close the training session.

Breathing Methods

The following is a brief description of the importance of learning proper breathing methods:

Efficient, mindful breathing is a key element of Tai Chi and a fundamental pathway through which Tai chi training affects health and well-being. In Tai Chi, and more broadly, in traditional Chinese medicine, the breath is important not only for efficient gas exchange – that is, oxygen in and carbon dioxide out – but also to serve additional key functions. These functions include massage of internal organs and tissues, regulation of emotions, and movement of internal energy within the body and between the body and the surrounding environment. Breathing also serves as a mechanism for accentuating or implementing other active ingredients of Tai Chi, such as awareness, intention, and structural integration. There are two main types of breathing methods used during Qigong and Tai Chi Chuan training, normal diaphragmatic breathing, and normal breathing. Different breathing methods are practiced during different Tai Chi activities. For warming up diaphragmatic and circle breathing are practiced. While practicing Tai Chi forms e.g. Yang Style 24, Dan Tien (diaphragmatic) breathing is used throughout the exercise.

Everything originates from xin – heart, first. It is then expressed through the body.

TAI CHI AS EXERCISE

Exercise as defined by Merriam-Webster in context of human fitness is “bodily exertion for the sake of developing and maintaining physical fitness” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). During Tai Chi training there is typically considerable bodily exertion.

Tai Chi is considered worldwide as a form of gentle to moderate level exercise that almost anyone can take part in. In an article written by the Mayo Clinic targeting stress management for a healthy lifestyle entitled, Tai chi: A gentle way to fight stress, Tai chi helps reduce stress and anxiety. And it also helps increase flexibility and balance. They state the following:

Tai chi is an ancient Chinese tradition that, today, is practiced as a graceful form of exercise. It involves a series of movements performed in a slow, focused manner and accompanied by deep breathing. Tai chi is low impact and puts minimal stress on muscles and joints, making it generally safe for all ages and fitness levels. In fact, because tai chi is a low-impact exercise, it may be especially suitable if you're an older adult who otherwise may not exercise (Mayo clinic, 2019).

The Mayo clinic article goes on to state the benefits of practicing Tai Chi:

When learned correctly and performed regularly, tai chi can be a positive part of an overall approach to improving your health. The benefits of tai chi may include decreased stress, anxiety and depression, improved mood, improved aerobic capacity, increased energy and stamina, improved flexibility, balance and agility, improved muscle strength and definition.



More research is needed to determine the health benefits of Tai Chi. Some evidence indicates that tai chi may also help: Enhance quality of sleep, enhance the immune system, help lower blood pressure, improve joint pain, improve symptoms of congestive heart failure, improve overall well-being, and reduce risk of falls in older adults (Mayo Clinic, 2019).

The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans Second Addition written by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2019) provides recommendation on the amount and type of exercise people should engage in to maintain or improve health. The Guide also reports the following on Tai Chi, “Tai chi is typically classified as a light-intensity physical activity but may be considered relatively moderate intensity for some adults. It includes balance activities, and some forms may be considered muscle strengthening” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). Tai Chi is also considered a “Muscle-Strengthening Activity”, and a “Multicomponent Physical Activity”.

Through researching the literature on Tai Chi as exercise there appears to be no disagreement that Tai Chi is a healthy form of exercise that most people can engage in at any level of fitness. Typical Tai Chi classes, as taught in formal schools, are one hour in length. Many Tai Chi schools offer classes at least three times a week that can include day, evening, and weekend classes. The following are the Key Guidelines the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2019) state for adults found in the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans Second Addition:

Key Guidelines for Adults

- Adults should move more and sit less throughout the day. Some physical activity is better than none. Adults who sit less and do any amount of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity gain some health benefits.
- For substantial health benefits, adults should do at least 150 minutes (2 hours and 30 minutes) to 300 minutes (5 hours) a week of moderate-intensity, or 75 minutes (1 hour and 15 minutes) to

150 minutes (2 hours and 30 minutes) a week of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity, or an equivalent combination of moderate- and vigorous-intensity aerobic activity. Preferably, aerobic activity should be spread throughout the week.

- Additional health benefits are gained by engaging in physical activity beyond the equivalent of 300 minutes (5 hours) of moderate-intensity physical activity a week.
- Adults should also do muscle-strengthening activities of moderate or greater intensity and that involve all major muscle groups on 2 or more days a week, as these activities provide additional health benefits (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019).

By attending three Tai Chi classes a week an adult could meet the basic recommendations for exercise. Those who wish to advance their skill in Tai Chi will often practice the Tai Chi forms several times a week at home that could add up to 300 minutes of recommended exercise weekly. Tai Chi can also be a part of multicomponent physical activity regimen incorporated into an individual's lifestyle.

*Be still, concentrate and fortify your spirit internally:
exude calmness, relaxation, composure, and ease on the
outside.*

TAI CHI AS MINDFULNESS

Tai Chi is well known as a “Mindfulness” practice. Mindfulness can be defined as a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis. In a Harvard Medical School special health report on Tai Chi by Dr. Peter M. Wayne, Ph D., it stated that ‘Awareness’ is one of eight main ingredients in Tai Chi. The report goes on to say:

This ingredient is essential in order to fully develop all the others. It begins as self-awareness. Paying attention to your breathing and the sensations in your body as you practice the slow, graceful movements of

tai chi helps you become more focused. It counteracts what Asian meditative traditions call “monkey mind,” the distracted thinking that focuses on external, past, or future events and commonly dwells on negative thoughts and what-ifs (Wayne, 2013).

In a typical Tai Chi training class, it is difficult to not be focused in the moment due to the continuous training activities. To learn the various forms associated with Tai Chi such as Yang Style 24 posture form, a student must stay focused on the trainer to learn each movement properly. Like learning how to dance, during Tai Chi training a student will learn how to move their whole body in unison to maintain balance, keep proper posture, breath in a deep and regulated manner and often memorize names of movements e.g., part the horse’s mane, brush the knee and push, and white crane spreads its wings. Managing all these aspects of learning Tai Chi naturally focuses the mind’s attention on the here and now moment to moment.

One challenge that often occurs with new practitioners of Tai Chi is getting past competitive self-judgement. Due to many individuals’ competitive nature, conditioned by cultural norms, negative self-judgement shows up during training when beginning to learn the intricate forms of Tai Chi. Statements such as, I’ll never be able to learn the forms or I won’t ever be as good as the advanced students, are self-deprecating in nature. Practicing mindfulness focuses an individual on the concept of accepting things as they are without labeling them as good, bad, right, or wrong. By removing the judgmental beliefs, one of the main tenets of Mindfulness practice, an individual can begin to experience more freedom to just be in the moment. tenet of Tai Chi which is inner training for self-improvement.



TAI CHI AS MEDITATION

Tai Chi is sometimes described as "moving meditation." It uses slow and careful movements. People learn to focus on each movement and become aware of their bodies and mind.

Many people are practicing some form of meditation throughout the world for the expressed purpose of improving their lives. In a research study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services it was estimated that 8.0% of U.S. adults (18 million) used Meditation (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, 2017). The research stated the following:

In meditation, a person learns to focus attention. Research is under way to find out how meditation may influence health. Most meditative techniques started in Eastern religious or spiritual traditions, but today, many people use meditation outside of its traditional religious or cultural settings (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, 2017).

In 2012, meditation included Mantra meditation, Mindfulness meditation, Spiritual meditation, and meditation used as a part of other practices (including yoga, tai chi, and qi gong) (Clarke, Black, Stussman, Barnes & Nahin, 2015).

Tai Chi practice necessarily means focusing one's attention on breathing properly, correct posture, and moving the various parts of the body in very specific ways in a specific form. A great deal of focused concentration is necessary to learn Tai Chi forms which means other thoughts cannot be present. Most who begin Tai Chi training struggle with maintaining present centeredness as they are self-critical and often focus on trying to be as good as their instructor. New beginners also struggle with focus on learning Tai Chi forms because they have been used to being distracted by too many thoughts about too many issues. For these beginners, Tai Chi can become another of those distracting thoughts which only leads to more stress. Once a new student learns that Tai Chi is a form of meditation, they can learn the art of meditation which can have a positive impact on their overall wellness.

As in learning any new skill, for most, practice is necessary. Performing a Tai Chi form such as Yang Style 24 Form, like performing any other skill, requires two parts. First, learning the skill and then second, practicing the skill. Meditation is a skill that requires learning and practice and as with any other skill, the more one practices correctly the more one improves in their skill. Since meditation is known to be a beneficial life skill that can help reduce stress, improve relationships, and even improve work and education performance, it seems important that this skill is practiced enough to achieve a reasonably high level of proficiency. By practicing Tai Chi, either in a class/school setting led by an instructor or by oneself, training in meditation is also taking place. And, as one practices their Tai Chi forms over and over becoming more and more skilled at moving gracefully through each part of the form they are developing their ability to be meditative about moving through life in a more calm and focused manner.

TAI CHI AS BREATHING

“The breath is the most powerful tool for gathering, circulating, purifying, and directing Qi” (Jahnke, 2002). Dr. Jahnke states:

The word inspiration, which means literally “to breathe in,” also refers to the rush that we feel when overtaken by spiritual energy. Inspiration is what we call the force that impels us forward into life with enthusiasm; it is the divine influence that brings forth creativity and vitality. The breath is a powerful link to the most profound medicine that we produce within us physically, mentally, and even spiritually. (Janke, 1997)

In the book, *The Harvard Medical School Guide to Tai Chi* it’s stated:

Breathing in Tai Chi serves more than the function of bringing oxygen into and expelling carbon dioxide out of the body. Breathing provides an internal massage, serves as a tool for bodily awareness and focus, balances the nervous system and emotions, and regulates and enhances Qi flow. The quality of our breath, easy or labored, shallow or deep, also provides feedback that informs our posture and movement patterns. During typical Tai Chi training, the air that is breathed in and out should have a soft,

continuous flow. The idea is to attain a level of natural breath that flows regularly, lightly, slowly, and deeply. During some Tai Chi exercises, you may benefit from coordinating breathing with your movements (Wayne, 2013).

In his book, *Tai Chi Chuan: Classical Yang Style*, Dr. Yang states:

A good method of practicing is to simply focus on your breathing, filling the lungs from the bottom to the top and emptying them from the top to the bottom. Remember to avoid tension and to let the breath flow in and out in a controlled, smooth, soft, and uniform manner. In addition, the breathing helps to prepare you for the next stage of regulating the mind. The breath is a pathway linking the external and the internal universes, and you can use it to guide yourself to this deeper level of existence. The speed, depth, and quality of your breathing will have a direct impact on your taiji, your mental and emotional states, and your physical and energetic bodies. Therefore, in taijiquan practice, you must learn how to breathe deeply and correctly (Yang, 2010).

Learning to breathe properly is a fundamental aspect of Tai Chi training. Volumes have been written about the health benefits of proper breathing and so there is no argument against this practice. Practicing Tai Chi on a regular basis using the breathing patterns can help to re-regulate the stress system which gives a sense of control and initiates healing.

TAI CHI AS STRETCHING

Tai Chi Chuan, like other forms of martial arts and other sports, uses various methods of stretching for both warming up and cooling down. Stretching is also incorporated within the Tai Chi Chuan forms to improve flexibility, stability, and fluidity of motion. In a typical Tai Chi training session several forms of stretching are used derived from an ancient practice known as Qigong, pronounced Chee-gung. The following is a short description of Qigong from the National Qigong Association:

Qigong can be described as a mind-body-spirit practice that improves one's mental and physical health by integrating posture, movement, breathing technique, self-massage, sound, and focused intent. There are likely thousands of qigong styles, schools, traditions, forms, and lineages, each with practical applications and different theories about Qi (“subtle breath” or “vital energy”) and Gong (“skill cultivated through steady practice”).

Qigong opens the flow of energy in meridians used in acupuncture and Chinese medicine. It enhances our ability to feel the Life Force underlying the physical world and to deepen our communication with it.

Physically, slow gentle qigong movements warm tendons, ligaments, and muscles; tonify vital organs and connective tissue; and promote circulation of body fluids (blood, synovial, lymph). Thousands of studies have shown qigong effective in helping to heal life challenges ranging from high blood pressure and chronic illness to emotional frustration, mental stress, and spiritual crisis (National Qigong Association, n.d.).

One form of Qigong commonly used by Tai Chi trainers/practitioners for warm-up is called Ba Duan Jin (8 Brocades). The following description is from an article published in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health:

Baduanjin (also called Eight Section Brocade) is a traditional Chinese mind-body exercise routine, characterized by slow, coordinative, sequential movements. Many historians believe that Baduanjin was initially created by the ancient Chinese National Hero (Yue Fei) in the Song Dynasty to help his soldiers recover from their bodily injuries and prepare for future battles. With the passage of time, and particularly with the establishment of the Chinese Health Qigong Association (CHQA), movements in the Baduanjin form have been developed and reinforced to meet needs of individuals for both physical and psychological

wellbeing. When compared to the complex movements in Tai-Chi, one of the most popular Chinese traditional Qigong exercises, Baduanjin is easy-to-learn because it involves only eight separate movements. Each individual movement needs to be practiced on both the left and right sides of the body, while integrating deep rhythmic breathing, a meditative mind, and musculoskeletal stretching and relaxation (Zou et al. 2018).

Incorporating Baduanjin into a Tai Chi training session provides a means for a healthy low impact warm-up that improves breathing, strength, focus, and flexibility which sets the stage for the rest of the training session.

APPENDIX SECTION

APPENDIX A BA DUAN JIN QIGONG

Two Hands Press the Heavens



The hands go from low to high, fingers intertwined to form a strong support for the heavens.

Inhale on the up, hold for a moment, then exhale on the down. Round, circular, soft movements. But make no mistake: there is a lot of stretching going on here. Joints are opening up, muscles are made supple, the spine and rib cage receive attention, too. Deep, calm breaths are beneficial for the lungs.

Draw the Bow to Shoot the Vulture



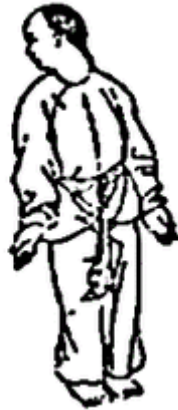
This movement opens the chest and lungs while teaching us to drop our breath into the dantien. As we shift our stance from side to side feel the interplay of yin and yang. Our eyes are open wide to see the target in the distance.

Separate Heaven and Earth



Our hands spiral up and down from our center. Heaven, Human and Earth are all apparent. We must drop our breath to the abdomen while lifting the top of our head.

Wise Owl Gazes Backwards



The movement of the arms activates all yin and yang organs to build immunity. We must be careful not to lose our center as we move through the inhale. The exhale is brief but grounding.

Swimming the Head and Lowering the Body



Here we empty the fire from our heart to calm the spirit. We sink more and more into bliss with each exhale. Do not lose the root as the head dips.

Moving the hands down the back and legs and touching the feet



First, we stretch the Du Mai opening from our tail bone though our spine to the top of the head. Then we reach down to touch the bubbling spring at the base of our feet. The kidneys are massaged vigorously at the end of this movement.

Thrusting the fist and making the eyes glare to enhance strength.



We strengthen the tendons through the Liver and gallbladder. Legs become stronger with each movement. Exhale slow, inhale fast but deep.

Raising and lowering the heels to cure diseases.



We bounce 9 times clearing the channels and strengthening the Kidney Jing to end this form. All of the meridians are now clear.

APPENDIX B YANG STYLE 8 TAI CHI CHUAN

1. Rising posture

Step with left foot to a small horse stance. Raise both hands in front of you to shoulder height. Then lower them again. Armpits feel hollow, the elbows point slightly outward and the fingers are reaching gently to the front.

2. Left and Right Flip the Elbows Repulse the Monkey

Left hand presses out in front with palm facing forward, right hand and arm open to the rear. Left hand comes back in palm up as right hand goes over the left palm like it's pushing something off it. Left hand and arm open to the rear and then left hand goes forward again over the right palm like it's pushing something off it.

3. Brush the Knee and Push

Draw the right hand up next to right ear, then use your left hand to make a blocking motion over the left knee while the right palm strikes forward from the chest level to the left side. Repeat this motion to the right side.

4. Part the Horse's Mane

Shift the weight to the right leg and hold the ball on the right hip (right hand on top). Step with left foot, heel to toe, to the left the right-hand brushes over the raising left hand as weight is shifted to the left. Shift weight to left leg, bring the right foot up to a cat stance and hold the ball on the left side (left on top). Repeat to the right side.

5. Cloud Hands

Draw the left hand in and press the right hand down into right bow stance. Pull the right hand up in front of chest and press the left down while drawing right foot up to a very small horse stance. Now raise the left while moving left foot out to the left to a bow stance, push right hand down. Bring the RH up while bringing the RF to a small horse stance and drop the left hand again. Bring LH up while moving LF to small bow stance. Repeat movements to the right side.

6. Golden Rooster Stands on One Leg

Raise the right leg up, both hands point up, right hand above left hand. Raise the left leg up, both hands point up, left hand above right hand.

7. Separate the Right Leg (Triple Attack)

Circle the two hands up to the chest (RH in front). Draw the right leg up and extend the right foot to a front kick and both palms to the side (palm away). Repeat for left foot to a front kick.

8. Grab the Sparrow's Tail Section.

Pull the right foot into cat stance and hold the ball (left hand on top).

Ward Off – Step with right foot to bow stance, heel to toe, and push with right hand (back of hand) while left hand follows. When both hands are extended out, both hands flip to their opposite position, shift the weight back and press back out.

Roll-Back – Shift the weight back while bringing the right hand around the front of the body.

Press – left hand moves behind right wrist and presses it forward as the weight shifts forward.

Push – Pull the weight back again, draw both hands toward the chest, circle them down in front and push back out with the weight (palms forward). Repeat on the other side.

Closing

Ride the tiger position. Right hand high, left hand low, with tiger claw hands. Bring left leg up and cross the hands in front of the chest, circle hands to a salute and bow to finish.

RESOURCES

Tai Chi Chuan

The Harvard Medical School Guide to Tai Chi: 12 Weeks to a Healthy Body, Strong Heart & Sharp Mind by Peter M. Wayne, 2013.

This book is a comprehensive overview of the health benefits associated with practicing Tai Chi along with details on the practice of Tai Chi. Also reviewed in this book are eight active ingredients of Tai Chi that resonate with the intention of Tai Chi Therapy. This is the primary book for beginning to gain knowledge about the practice of Tai Chi Chuan as a form of psychotherapy.

Breathing

The New Science of Breath 2nd Edition by Stephen B. Elliott, 2005.

This book provides a scientific understanding of how breathing affects the whole person. The focus is on developing methods to manage the autonomic nervous system through purposeful breathing methods to reduce stress and improve health. 13 case examples are provided in the use of Coherent Breathing for various mental health disorders including anxiety, depression, hypertension, anger, and even family intervention. Also provided is a brief review of how specialized breathing has been an integral part of other practices such as Yoga and Meditation. The following is an excerpt from the book's introduction:

Physical Stretching

Stretching: 35 stretches to improve flexibility and reduce pain by Lauren E. Elson and Michele Stanten, 2017.

This manual is published by Harvard Medical School and provides a short, yet concise, overview of stretching for overall health. It provides basic stretching information along with safety guidelines. It also provides 35 different stretches with pictures and descriptions that are considered fundamental to health.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness for Beginners by Jon Kabat-Zinn, 2016.

This book is a comprehensive introduction to Mindfulness practice and is a vital resource in the beginning of developing a mindful approach to life in general. Reading this book will provide a strong foundation to being able to guide others in developing their own mindful way of dealing with difficult life issues.

Qigong

Ba Duan Jin: Eight-Section Qigong Exercise by Chinese Health Qigong Association, 2017.

This short instructional book will provide some valuable details in improving the practice of Ba Duan Jin qigong. Although there are nuance differences in practicing Ba Duan Jin that will be noticed upon reviewing you tube and other resources, there are a few universal ideas and practices that will lead to the desired results.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Scott Paul Rheinschmidt is a retired military veteran who served for 24 years in the Air National Guard and deployed several times to Southwest Asia in support of OEF-OIF operations. After retirement he enrolled in graduate school at St. Mary's University in San Antonio for the Community Counselor master's degree with subsequent licensure as a Licensed Professional Counselor. He completed his doctorate in Psychology and Christian counseling in 2020. In 2009 he joined a local martial arts school, Shaolin-Do West San Antonio, and began training in Tai Chi Chuan, Baguazhang, Xingyi, Qigong, and Kung Fu. He achieved the rank of Sandan (3rd Degree Black Belt) in Kung Fu in 2020 and Sandan (3rd Degree Black Sash) in Tai Chi Chuan in 2021. The hope is that many will find strength, vitality, and inner peace through the holistic practice of Tai Chi Chuan enabling a more joyful and fruitful life.