

The Benefits of Tai Chi and how it can improve your life

by

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Foreword

I'm assuming that you are busy and have lots of things that you need to do... So I'll try and keep things brief. Let me start by saying that time invested in practising Tai Chi (and its sister art Qigong) may be one of the best investments that you will ever make.

That's a bold claim, let me explain why. Tai Chi isn't magic, people who practice Tai Chi can still get ill, we all get old, and we all die... That sucks!!! But what sucks even more, is living your life feeling unwell, lacking energy, or simply missing what the French call 'Joie de vivre' (i.e. exuberant enjoyment of life.)

Practising Tai Chi regularly will help with a number of health issues, may prevent or delay other issues, will give you exercise and energy, and almost certainly give you a calmness and peace of mind that aids your enjoyment of life.

What are Tai Chi and Qigong?

Tai Chi and Qigong are two different but related Chinese arts.

Tai Chi was created a number of hundreds of years ago (nobody can give an accurate date, although many claims as to its origin exist) and it was originally a martial art designed for fighting and at that it was enormously successful.

Over the centuries it was noticed that people practicing Tai Chi seemed to be benefitting more from improved health and wellness than compared with other martial arts. So much so in fact, that nowadays Tai Chi is taught mainly for its beneficial properties.

Qigong traces its origins back much further than Tai Chi, indeed some aspects of the art may be as much as 3,000 years old. It is (almost totally) a health promoting and maintaining art with nothing to do with fighting.

Most Tai Chi instructors teach both arts, although there are also Qigong teachers who only teach Qigong and not Tai Chi.

Tai Chi has many aspects to it but the most commonly known one (and most often seen in TV and film) are the dance-like routines of movement that look aesthetically pleasing. These are called forms and vary from quite short ones e.g. 'Eight Move One Step Form' through to 'Long Yang Form' with 108 moves... and even beyond. Both short and long forms have their similarities, differences, and benefits and challenges. At the Agar-Hutton Tai Chi Academy we predominantly teach shorter forms as we find those are the easiest ones for students to learn and to practice and it is the continued practice of forms that is the key to the rewards that practicing the art brings.

Qigong has 'forms' too, although they are rarely called that, but in addition there are Qigong exercises where you hold a static posture, trying to experience and develop the ability to be motionless and to relax VERY deeply and to allow the body to balance and energise itself.

Within this document, I often use the term 'Tai Chi' to include both Tai Chi and Qigong, I will explain the arts separately where appropriate.

About the author

I am Robert Agar-Hutton, The founder and chief instructor of the Agar-Hutton Tai Chi Academy. I have been a student of Tai Chi since the late 1970s and an instructor since about 1993. I am regularly asked to teach Tai Chi and Self Defence seminars in the UK, USA, and Malaysia.

I have a B.Sc. (Hons) degree in Martial Arts and Sports Psychology from the University of Derby, earned after three years of full-time study, as a mature student, between 2007 and 2010. This degree makes me one of only a handful of people in the UK, and probably the only Tai Chi instructor, with both practical experience and a formal academic qualification in martial arts.

None of that matters very much, what does matter is can I teach YOU how to develop the mindset and physical skills that will help you to get fit and keep healthy? I believe the answer to that question is YES and look forward to having you join a Tai Chi and Qigong session very soon.

Now, please read on and learn all about Tai Chi and Qigong and how it can help you...

1. Tai Chi as exercise.

Tai Chi is 'low impact' and gentle in terms of the strain placed on the body. This makes it suitable for people of most ages and most physical abilities.

Tai Chi tries to get you to continuously make small improvements to your posture and way of movement, improving balance and much more.

The instructor will encourage you - posture a bit more upright, move a little slower, flow a bit smoother, feel what your body is doing, keep your attention on your movement, etc, etc. There are a wide range of things in Tai Chi that gently and progressively teach the body to work more efficiently, that make the mind focus more sharply, and teach you to relax to a greater degree. The body is an adaptive mechanism and can and will allow you to achieve more than perhaps you ever dreamed you could.

Of course, it's up to you, as you practice, to decide if your Tai Chi is an occasional pursuit or a regular part of your life - whatever you decide, Tai Chi will help you achieve your goals and benefit from them.

2. Aid to health.

Tai Chi makes you more supple and it teaches you to breathe in a deeper and more relaxed manner. Deeper breathing gets more air (in particular Oxygen) into the system. That's good.

There have been a large number of scientific studies showing a variety of benefits that practicing Tai Chi can bring you. These have provided a body of evidence that shows that Tai Chi is beneficial for both helping people deal with a wide range of existing health and medical conditions and also (in a number of cases) helping prevent issues that can lead to problems.

Obviously the most significant of the latter is that Tai Chi helps prevent falls in the elderly. Falls often lead to fractures, and fractures may lead to further complications, some potentially life threatening.

For elderly people Tai Chi is obviously great, but for younger people, it's like buying shares in a company called 'My-Health Limited', where when you get older, it will pay dividends.

3. Relaxation.

Once you know a Tai Chi form, (a pre-arranged series of movements) then when you perform it, your mind should be fully engaged with the moment-by-moment action that your body is doing. This integration of conscious mind and body movement means that your mind is focusing on the NOW and is not worried or distracted, which is relaxing and good for your mental (and physical) health.

A somewhat over-hyped term is 'Mindfulness', in the last few years it has become somewhat of an 'in thing', but mindfulness has been an integral part of Tai Chi for hundreds of years.

The first phase of Tai Chi is learning what you are meant to be doing. What foot goes where? How you move your arms and body? Possibly, depending on the teacher, synchronising your movements with your breathing. It's not 'difficult' (for most people) but like learning any new skill, it does take time and practice.

The next phase is the interesting one. Once you have learned a few moves, so you know the physical 'what goes where' of it, you start to practice paying detailed attention to what is happening - the placement of your limbs, your weight distribution, the depth and speed of your respiration, your state of mind and more... This concentration moment-by-moment on YOURSELF is a form of meditation and it is both deeply engaging and relaxing.

Also, the movements themselves are done in such a way that virtually no stress is placed on the body and that is relaxing too.

4. Concentration.

Although this may seem in conflict with the previous point 'relaxing'. The same moment-by-moment integration of mind and body will aid and improve your ability to concentrate. It is quite common, both at work and in our private lives, to get distracted. Tai Chi helps you avoid this.

Tai Chi can also improve memory skills and your ability to focus. In today's busy-busy-busy world, there are an ever-increasing number of things that vie for our attention, and distractions are everywhere. It may be that your job would benefit from you having an increased ability to focus and concentrate or it may be that it would improve your ability to communicate with people (including your loved ones) - we have all done that thing where we are only half listening to someone and they notice and get annoyed!

The practice of Tai Chi will not turn you into 'Superman', and it will not change 'Forest Gump' into 'Einstein' - BUT it will (if you want it to) help you improve the way you manage your mind. One of the interesting things that I have found over the years, is that the calmness that Tai Chi fosters, includes the creation, or enhancement, of an ability to notice what my mind is doing, as it's doing it...

E.g. Something annoys me and I notice what's happening, rather than just 'being annoyed' and reacting from there. That gives me control and choices as to how I will react.

5. Fun.

Fun is underrated, but if you look at interviews with people who make it past their 100th birthday, you will often find that they have a great sense of humour and fun. It's important, (Heck, I'd say it's your right) to be happy and enjoy yourself. Tai Chi is just a nice thing to do for its own sake.

I have suggested that Tai Chi stops me getting annoyed, that's not completely true...

Something that does annoy me is when I see adults who have forgotten that having fun is OK. I get that working may be hard; raising a family can be tough; dealing with money problems or health issues can be draining... But - it is completely OK to have fun.

I have a grandson who is an expert at jumping in puddles - why, because it's FUN. Kids generally understand the idea of fun - it's something that you do that gives you pleasure and it ABSOLUTELY does not have to have any serious or lasting purpose.

Whilst I take my Tai Chi very seriously (heck I've been doing it since the late 1970s) I ALWAYS enjoy it and have fun doing it.

If you do Tai Chi (or ANYTHING) and it's not fun, you really need to consider why you are doing it.

6. Depth of study.

One of the great things about learning Tai Chi is that although it is easy to start, the art has a depth that means your learning can progress and continue for as long as you want. With Tai Chi there are always deeper aspects to discover.

I used to have an instructor who would occasionally say to me “Very good...” at which point I would glow with pride “ he would then say “...but” at which point I would worry. He would then go on to explain some additional element or subtlety that could be added to my Tai Chi practice to make it better, where better usually equated to being new and challenging to understand or to do.

Now, of course, there are people who like the thing they are studying to be neat and tidy. If you were a child studying mathematics and I taught you that TWO plus TWO equals FOUR, the great thing about that is that it's pretty much an absolute fact $2+2=4$ - yes that's right. However, there are other people (I am one, maybe you are too) who like fields of study where the body of knowledge is continually advancing, like say particle physics, or anthropology, or... Tai Chi.

There are many layers to Tai Chi and of course many different styles and sub-styles, I have studied quite a lot of Yang style and some Sun style and some Chen, and a little of Lee, and Wudang styles but that means I haven't even started to look at Wu style or Hao style. And as for sub-styles, well I suspect that there are probably hundreds of those. Quite enough to keep someone busy for a long, long time.

And, as if that wasn't enough, as you study even one style (any of them) you will keep finding things that you didn't see before, applications; ways of using the body; ways of using the mind... It genuinely is as deep a study as you care to make of it.

7. Useable skills.

You can learn Tai Chi safe in the knowledge that you will soon have useable skills but be able to add new learning about the subject year after year after year (I started in the late 1970s, I'm an 'expert' and YES I am still learning).

One of the best things about Tai Chi is that it stays new and fresh, you can continue to refine what you know as well as learn new things. Sometimes that will be a subtlety and sometimes that will be a major thing like learning a new form, or learning two person exercises, or learning a new Tai Chi weapon. Most teachers don't teach weapons, but most styles of Tai Chi will include some or many of Sword, Sabre, Staff, Spear, Fan, Walking Stick, and more.

A question you may want to consider is what 'usable skills' will I learn? The best skills are the ones that become so much a part of you as to be made virtually invisible. So that would include things like:

- Having improved posture.
- Being mentally calm under pressure.
- Moving in a relaxed way, to conserve strength and reduce wear and tear on the joints of the body.
- Being friendly to everyone, because physical fitness (and possibly some self-defence skills) induce a feeling of safety and confidence.
- Having improved health, the calming and relaxing aspects of Tai Chi, also help to reduce stress. Having reduced stress helps allow your immune system to function at optimum efficiency, both protecting you from disease and aiding recovery.

Of course, YOUR useable skills may or may not be the same as someone else's. This too is a wonderful thing; Tai Chi is a personal endeavour and brings individual rewards.

8. Practice regime.

Tai Chi can (and should) be practiced every day, but it's very forgiving and if life gets in the way and you don't practice for a day, a week, a month, or even longer. When you come back to it, Tai Chi will be happy to see you, and you can continue with your practice.

Some people practice every day, I try to, but sometimes don't. Some people train once or twice a week. Some people train sporadically maybe only an hour or so every month... Tai Chi doesn't mind. Tai Chi is YOURS and it's up to you, if you practice a little or a lot.

They say you never forget how to ride a bike. Well, trust me, if you don't practice your Tai Chi for a while you may well forget bits and get 'rusty'. But, do you know what, it doesn't matter. Tai Chi is non-judgemental, Tai Chi is absolutely happy to see you again, like a really good old friend. And you simply start doing whatever you can and start progressing again.

Another of the things that makes Tai Chi special is that you can start to practice it at the age of five years old or you can start to practice it at the age of eighty-five years old. If you are fit great, but unfit people and people with mental and physical disabilities can practice it too.

I personally have taught people with physical injuries, physical disabilities, arthritis sufferers, recovering from stroke, Alzheimer's and other neurological conditions and injuries... and the list goes on. Tai Chi can be enjoyed by all and in most cases will have beneficial effects as well.

Now, I will expand on the last sentence by saying that whilst the practice of Tai Chi can reduce the effects of arthritic pain and increase range of motion, it does NOT cure it. Where illnesses like Alzheimer's are concerned, there is no good evidence that practicing Tai Chi helps with the condition or the prognosis, but it can improve quality of life i.e. No matter what condition you are in, doing something nice will generally be pleasant and good for you to do.

9. Tai Chi is yours.

Your practice of Tai Chi is personal to you. Yes, there are principles to apply and things to try to achieve, but in general Tai Chi is yours and what you do will be correct and beneficial for you.

There are 'rules' in Tai Chi, things like:

- Tuck the tailbone.
- Raise the crown of the head.
- Breathe through the nose and hold the tip of your tongue to the roof of your mouth.
- and many more.

They all have a reason and a purpose but once you understand some of the rules you will realise that they are all about trying to get you to use your body in the most efficient way possible in order to do whatever it is that you want to do.

Once you know and can make that part of what you do, you will find that you achieve a gracefulness and purpose in your movements and in your daily life that most people do not have.

Tai Chi is like a key and once you start practicing it, you will find that the key unlocks many doors.

10. Where to practice.

If you normally go to the gym, then you know that when you can't get to the gym, your options are limited. You probably don't carry a set of weights or a treadmill with you when you go away. Tai Chi is with you wherever you are. If you have room to stand up and take one step forwards, then you have enough space to practice Tai Chi.

Tai Chi can be done in virtually no space whatsoever. Of course it can also be done in a manner that needs space, but that is not critical. What is important is that you learn how to make your movements precise and practical; your breathing deep and relaxed; your mind clear and focused.

Tai Chi can be done indoors or outside. I have done it near the Palace of Westminster in London and on the deck of a Trimaran (a smallish sailing vessel) off the Florida coast. I have done it in my home, in gyms, in offices, in gardens and fields... The great thing about Tai Chi is its flexibility, if you want to practice, you can.

11. How long is practice time.

When you practice Tai Chi, a session can be for five minutes or a couple of hours, both have value. You will never actually be too busy to do Tai Chi.

Once you understand how to do Tai Chi you will find that no matter how busy your schedule, you can always find time to get away from the stress and strain of the day and relax and exercise.

It is possible to practice Tai Chi for just a few minutes or for several hours non-stop (overall fitness level allowing). There are benefits to all the different forms of practice.

Long hours of practice are beneficial if you want to try and perfect some aspect of the art or if you are at a retreat alongside other Tai Chi exponents. Or if you are perhaps learning a new form (the pre-arranged sets of movement, that encapsulate the principles of Tai Chi).

Five minutes can give you a quick but relaxing break.

More normally, you will probably practice for 40 minutes to an hour, which could include:

- Mobility and loosening exercises.
- One or more forms.
- Individual or partner practice of applications.
- Qigong exercises.
- and more...

You will probably, over time, come to find a regime that suits you and your way of life. That is good, as Tai Chi should be 'yours'.

12. Improving balance.

Tai Chi aids balance, both physical balance – scientific studies have shown that one of the benefits of Tai Chi is to help prevent falls in the elderly - and mental balance, which is a positive outcome for people of any age.

In cold weather the pavement (sidewalk) may get icy. At any age, falling over can hurt. It's not just the elderly who end up with a fracture to the leg or arm... Tai Chi aids balance and it also teaches you to relax. If you should trip and fall, being relaxed rather than being tense may be the difference between a bruise and a break.

Physical balance is important, but mental balance is arguably more so.

Challenges and upsets, happen to everyone. Some are minor like maybe not getting the pay rise that would have been nice but was not essential, or major like an illness being diagnosed, or the break-up of a relationship. Tai Chi is NOT magic and will not stop you reacting to events, but it is able to act as a rock, a touchstone, which allows you to keep some sense of self and carry on.

When your mental balance gets disturbed then Tai Chi can help you. You will develop an underlying generally pervasive feeling that all will be OK. That you can cope.

Your mental posture is definitely aided by (if not generated by) your practice of Tai Chi.

13. Age.

Tai chi is often seen as just an adult pastime, but it's suitable for people of any age. So it can be something for whole families to do together, if they want to.

In the West, Tai Chi is taught differently to the East. Yes, in both places a lot of older people practice it, but younger people practice it more in the East. That's a shame as the benefits of Tai Chi (both physical and mental) are just as useful to an 8 year old as they are to a 68 year old.

Once that is understood, Tai Chi can become a family pastime.

14. Self defence.

It's not the reason why most people learn, but for those that are interested in it, Tai Chi has a range of effective methods for keeping you safe.

Tai Chi is not great for sport fighting, from time-to-time you see it being used for that, but it generally looks indistinguishable from wrestling. However, when it is used for self defence it's quite different and generally both looks - and is - quite dangerous.

Most of the moves in Tai Chi were created some hundreds of years ago in China and there, the idea was almost certainly to make sure than an attacker could not come back and try to attack you again. A lot of the defensive moves have the potential to cripple or even kill an attacker. Which is very far from what Tai Chi has come to symbolise in the modern world, when you think of elderly people moving slowly and looking serene.

Tai Chi, as I have said before, is a very deep art and some people are interested in learning and practicing the self defence aspects. Other people are not interested in self-defence at all and that is OK. As has been mentioned before, Tai Chi is very accommodating and once you start to practice it, it becomes your art.

And Now

If there is a Tai Chi club local to you, go and try it. If you are not sure about the club and if it has a website, email me the details at robert@ahcca.co.uk and I'll be happy to give you my opinion on it.

If you would like to start learning Tai Chi with me, then we can offer you in-person sessions, live online via Zoom sessions, or a pre-recorded course of study.

Just go to <https://www.ahcca.co.uk> or call me on 07771 333 369 for more information.

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