

T'AI CHI CH'UAN

T'ai Chi Ch'uan is an ancient Chinese martial art that has its roots in two major Chinese texts: the I Ching (pronounced E Ching) which describes the interplay of two basic forces, Yin and Yang, and is used to foretell events; and the Tao Te Ching, a book of poetry by Lao-tzu. These works provide the basic underlying philosophy of T'ai Chi.

The origins of T'ai Chi are lost in antiquity with much speculation on when and where it began. The earliest documented records describe a system of martial arts back in the 18th century. These systems were family secrets and were taught only to members of a particular family which included servants as well as blood relatives. However, although all family members were taught the rudiments of the system for its health benefits, only a select few were taught the key martial aspects.

T'ai Chi is what is referred to as an internal martial art. In many martial arts the practitioner relies on strength as well as technique to overcome an opponent. These martial arts require as much physical conditioning as they do training in technique. In T'ai Chi the practitioner learns the key aspects of the technique with very little emphasis on strength conditioning. T'ai Chi does not require muscle power, rather it utilizes the basic energy in the body, chi, and learns to circulate and direct chi. This combined with specific physical movements allows the T'ai Chi practitioner to overcome very large and strong opponents.

Although T'ai Chi is a powerful martial art it is used primarily as a meditational exercise. There are several reasons for this. First, to become proficient at T'ai Chi requires 10 years or more of practice. Up until that time the student would not have the technique and internal power to successfully utilize T'ai Chi as a martial art. Secondly, as soon as T'ai Chi training is begun the student will feel the health benefits - circulation will be increased, breathing will become easier and the flow of chi energy will restore vitality to the muscles, nerves and skin. Thirdly, the practice of T'ai Chi is easy to perform, utilizing flowing, circular motions performed at a slow and even pace. It is not aerobic nor bone jarring making it a perfect exercise for people of all ages. Lastly, because of its inherent simplicity the mind is freed of its daily problems, becomes quiet, and meditation is begun allowing the practitioner to feel centered within the universe.

The T'ai Chi style that I teach is called the Yang style and is named after Yang Chen Fu. There are several forms that can be learned including a staff form and a sword form, but the beginning student will start with a solo form that uses only the hands, called T'ai Chi Chu'an. This beginning form is a derivative of the original Yang form and has been condensed from the original 150 movements to only 43 movements. This was accomplished by Cheng Man-Ching by deleting many of the repetitions within the long form and thus it allows the students to learn the entire form much quicker without sacrificing the health benefits that are achieved by performing the many different postures.

Learning the short form requires practicing once a week for nine months to a year. After that time the student will be able to perform the form themselves. In the old days of training the Master would stand at the front of the class and perform the movements and the students would do their best to imitate them. However, it was not possible to see what the Master was doing and since the movements of T'ai Chi are naturally deceiving learning T'ai Chi was a slow and agonizing process. In my classes the students will see each of the movements performed from several angles and the mechanics of each movement are explained. Practice consists of repeatedly performing the movements and the classes will consistently review old movements and well as add new ones. It is said that it takes three weeks just to learn the rudiments of a movement and then another year to understand its basic aspects. Therefore the student need not feel uneasy about not learning the movements on the first day they are shown for they will be reviewed regularly.

T'ai Chi is a wonderful art to learn because it is dynamic in nature, free to change and grow as it is learned. Although the postures are well developed as to their function for both health and martial abilities it is up to each individual to fit the form to their abilities. So a young person might sink very low on some movements while an older person might be more upright, but each is performing T'ai Chi and gaining the health benefits.