

The Art of Meditation Through Movement

by Shoshanna Katzman



Translated as “grand ultimate”, tai chi philosophy emphasizes maintaining balance in all things, especially in terms of the complementary yet opposing forces of yin and yang. It is a 3,000 year old tradition based on the cyclical patterns of nature as tai chi practice enhances physical and energetic health. Also known as “shadow boxing” due to its martial arts roots, tai chi is still taught with this emphasis by many instructors throughout the world. Yet, in the United States it is just as common to find teachers also focusing on spiritual and health benefits.

Tai chi is characterized by slow and flowing movements likened to a dance, commonly known as “the set”. Profound healing benefits result through diligent, regular practice - namely a strong and flexible body, peaceful and sharp mind, and enlivened yet tranquil spirit. Numerous scientific research studies have proven it to be help for a myriad of health conditions. In terms of increasing balance for example, researchers at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University as well as at the University of Exeter (UK) found that an intensive tai chi training program improved balance control in elderly participants. In addition, a study funded by the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke shows that tai chi reduces balance impairments in patients with mild-to-moderate Parkinson's disease, with further benefits of improved functional capability.

Tai chi is frequently described as “meditation through movement”. The very first sign that a practitioner is developing a strong mind through tai chi practice is a general sense of inner calm combined with seeing things more clearly without distraction. This stems in part from the intent mental focus necessary to perform it correctly, where everything else, every thought, every worry dissolves as the mind is emptied of extraneous thoughts. This is one of the best surprises for beginner students as they appreciate the break from what the Chinese refer to as the “monkey mind” or as the saying so aptly describes “turning 5,000 thoughts into one”.

A student of tai chi is guided to achieve these results through the Chinese medicine rule “where the mind goes, the Qi will follow”. What this means in practical terms is that when a tai chi practitioner is performing their set they concentrate their eyes on particular areas of their bodies to shift where and how Qi is flowing through the body – specifically requiring a shift of energy from empty (yin) to full (yang). Furthermore, this requires a keen awareness of the mind/body relationship in terms of body position, synchronicity of movement, purposeful shifting of weight, calm breathing, soft relaxed gaze, inner connection, and awareness of one’s environment.

In this way, mindfulness becomes linked to the movements of the body creating a full awareness of everything that is happening within and around the tai chi practitioner, both physically and energetically. The person thus becomes integrated, centered, at peace, and fully present in the moment – certainly ready at any given second to handle anything coming his or her way. This has a huge impact in terms of boosting mental capacity, physical ability and spiritual acuity not only during the practice of these powerful movements but throughout the day.

Patience is a key attribute that resonates from a seasoned tai chi practitioner. This comes from giving oneself the time and energy that it takes to accomplish tai chi movements with precision and synchronicity. Without patience, tai chi is done as mostly a physical form, without embracing and allowing the energetic component of the set to blossom. Patience also becomes essential when tai chi is practiced within a group. Now, instead of having the responsibility to be mindful of one’s own movements, a tai chi practitioner must become completely aware of the timing and intent of the movements of all others in the group – a feat requiring extreme persistence, yet with great pay-back in terms of the wholeness, peace, and energy experienced by each member of the group as a result.

The tai chi experience is further supported by the Chinese medicine saying that “Qi behaves like water, it can’t be pushed – but it can be led”. When pushed, Qi becomes flooded in the wrong area of the energetic system leading to imbalanced energetics and physical problems; yet when it is led with mindfulness it flows freely and fully into just the right areas of the body leading to vibrant energy and physical wellness. In a nutshell, when all of these components are executed with mindful precision, tai chi as a moving meditation fosters deep respect and honor for self and others resulting in a more gentle, powerful and kind existence.

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