

Getting Fit with Taiji

by Shoshanna Katzman



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Approximately 250 million people practice taiji (pronounced “tie-gee”) throughout the world as a low-impact exercise for facilitating physical fitness and vibrant health. Commonly known as “tai chi” and originally created as a form of self-defense, it is still practiced by many for its martial applications. This is one of the main characteristics distinguishing it from its sister art of qigong (pronounced “chee-gung”).

Both are Chinese medicine self-healing practices that cultivate and integrate the physical, energetic and spiritual aspects of being. Taiji is more physical in nature and focused on building internal power. It is typically more difficult to learn and takes longer to complete the entire set of movements.

Taiji was originally named Changquan which translates as “long fist” to signify the similarity between its artful movements and the smooth, spacious endless flow of the Yangzi River. Many names of postures describe aspects of nature, celestial bodies or animal movement. In addition, taiji is practiced outdoors for communing with nature as well as utilizing its forces for self-nourishment and energetic transformation.

This ancient exercise works by building and balancing the flow of “qi” which is the vital or life energy pulsating throughout all living things. Sometimes translated as “the vapor of the finest matter,” the Chinese character for qi represents the steam that rises from a grain of cooking rice, symbolizing distilled essence. Taiji exercise maximizes immune function by building defensive qi and promotes cardiovascular health by nourishing qi of the heart and lungs. When balanced and strengthened by taiji practice, qi keeps a practitioner fit and healthy throughout their life.

Throughout the centuries, taiji has been touted for enhancing coordination, strength, flexibility and endurance along with balance and upright stature. It provides support or

prevents many types of injuries and health conditions, stemming from its ability to ameliorate pain and reduce inflammation by opening qi and blood flow throughout the body. It invigorates reproductive and sexual energy through balancing hormones, enhancing blood flow and boosting kidney qi.

As a holistic approach, the practice of Taiji reconciles and integrates opposites such as hard/soft and expansion/contraction. This serves to promote health through balancing the forces of yin and yang. For example, pushing motions engage yang energy and are done simultaneously with pulling motions that engage yin energy. A practitioner also learns to contract and draw energy inward to activate yin followed by opening and expansive yang movements for releasing energetic flow. Working with energies in this manner happens once taiji choreography has been learned and requires the development of targeted “mind intent”.

Awareness about the many benefits of taiji has come a long way in the United States. The first major article was back in July of 2002 when Time magazine published a piece entitled, “Why Tai Chi is the Perfect Exercise”. There have been a multitude of scientific studies proving what the ancients knew to be true. Most recently, the New York Times published an article in June of 2023 entitled, “Tai Chi Is a Workout for the Brain and Body.”

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