

## I. T'ai Chi Overview

### What is T'ai Chi?

T'ai Chi Ch'uan, commonly known as T'ai Chi, is a Chinese movement therapy that uses breathing and slow movements to promote healing. It is based on the same principles as [acupuncture](#), [acupressure](#) and [Qigong](#). Often referred to as "meditation in motion," T'ai Chi is used to calm the mind and improve the flow of qi, or "life energy." Millions of people practice T'ai Chi in China, and it is quickly growing in popularity in the western world.

### What is the history of T'ai Chi?

T'ai Chi originated in China during the 13th century and is attributed to a Taoist priest who was trained in both martial arts and spiritual practice. Finding his martial arts training rigorous and very physically demanding, he developed T'ai Chi after reportedly watching a battle between a snake and a crane and marveling at the natural grace and power of the animals. He took his martial arts training and softened it, focusing less on physical strengthening and more on focus and the flow of *qi*. He gradually developed a following of people, and the practice spread throughout China during the following centuries.

### What is the goal of T'ai Chi?

The practice of T'ai Chi focuses on flexibility and strength rather than on building muscle. As a non-combative martial art, it uses the principles of opposites, or *yin* and *yang* to join together internal forces such as mental clarity, with external forces such as movement and strength. Each movement has a purpose and a symbolic meaning and is practiced with a fluid, gentle motion.

### Are there different types of T'ai Chi?

There are 4 different schools of T'ai Chi, all of which originated from one practice. These different forms include *Chen*, *Yang*, *Wu*, and *Sun*. Each style is similar and share the same basic theory, but differ in their approach to training and style of movement.

- *Chen* is the oldest form of T'ai Chi and consists of low stances and powerful movements. Therefore, it is often more of an aerobic workout than the other styles.
- *Yang* is the style most commonly practiced in the west, and is made up of a series of slow, fluid movements that can take up to 40 minutes to complete. The focus in *yang* T'ai Chi is on gentle motions.
- The *Wu* style is focused on small movements that aim to increase mental focus and internal *qi* flow.
- The *Sun* style is a very slow, graceful practice that is characterized by using an open palm throughout the entire form. It is a good form of exercise for older adults, or people with limited physical capabilities.

## How do you practice T'ai Chi?

T'ai Chi is practiced as a series of movements linked together to form a continuous, fluid motion. It can be practiced at various levels, depending on physical fitness and length of study. A typical session might concentrate on a short form, which is made up of thirty-seven movements and takes around 10-15 minutes, or a long form, which is made up of one hundred movements and takes up 20-25 minutes.

T'ai Chi can be practiced alone, in a group, or with a partner. It is commonly practiced outside, as it is believed that the flow of *qi* in the body is more powerful when it is connected with the flow of *qi* within the universe.

## What are the benefits of T'ai Chi?

Anyone can benefit from T'ai Chi. It is often recommended to people who simply want to improve their overall health. Benefits include improved circulation, better balance, reduced stress and anxiety, improved aerobic capacity, and greater flexibility. It can be used to help people sleep deeper, improve their coordination and ease pain and stiffness.

Because it is a low-impact, weight-bearing form of exercise, it is also good for bone strength.

## How do I learn T'ai Chi?

While there are a number of videos and books designed to teach T'ai Chi, it is helpful to take a class and learn from a teacher, ideally someone who has been practicing for over 10 years. Along with the movement instruction, many practitioners teach the beliefs behind the practice, including the history and the principles of *qi* and Chinese philosophy.

## Sources

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