

Toward a Better Understanding of the Benefits of Practicing T'ai Chi Chuan

by Gregory Fong, May 2006

I want to emphasize at the outset that because no two people ever perform t'ai chi chuan in the same way, the student must regard the training as an evolving practice and a long journey of self-discovery. One must learn above all to put one's individuality into all that one does in training. In this context as elsewhere, the thought that one size fits all is a great stumbling block to one's development. That said, it is worth mentioning by way of introduction to t'ai chi chuan some of what are generally considered to be the benefits of regular practice.

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T'ai chi training is based on the premise that with diligent practice one can increase one's conscious control over one's bodily movements and, in this way, learn to guide the body with the mind. Doing so strengthens both the mind and the body. The central nervous system — consisting of the brain and the spinal cord — acts directly upon the nerves that control the muscles and indirectly upon the organs. An immense network of nerves connects the various parts of the organism in all directions. Many of our movements are under our conscious control, and many are not. Some, like those of breathing, are only partially so. But it is thought that, from the standpoint of mental and physical health, any method of training that strengthens our ability voluntarily to control our movements is likely to have a beneficial effect upon the organism as a whole. T'ai chi chuan is thus specifically recommended as a form of exercise that trains and conditions both mind and body together.

The movements of t'ai chi chuan flow smoothly into one another and bring every muscle and each joint into play. Proper practice crucially involves the student's breathing — and hence the muscles of the diaphragm — as well. Regular practice can help to increase circulation of the blood and the lymph and is thought to help purify the blood in the process. Indeed, practice of t'ai chi is among the best ways to eliminate waste products from the blood. For example, older students who are troubled by illnesses that, like arteriosclerosis, stem from a lower metabolic rate have found that regular practice of t'ai chi chuan has helped to cleanse their systems of materials produced by inadequate metabolism. The blood is also refreshed and revitalized because of the large intake of oxygen as a result of the deep breathing required for practice.

Regular t'ai chi practice also improves circulation because it improves muscle tone in the arms and especially in the legs. Because the veins have valves that are meant to control the direction of blood flow, the improved muscle tone caused by regular practice more correctly regulates the veins and helps to insure that blood is returned efficiently to the heart. Soft and unused muscles do not accomplish this as well. Moreover, the exercise of the diaphragm involved in breathing during t'ai chi chuan helps not only to bring oxygen to the lungs and to carry away carbon dioxide more efficiently, but it thereby improves circulation as well.

Many students find that the deep breathing associated with the practice of t'ai chi chuan improves their digestion as well. This is due in part to the massaging of the viscera that is the result of a greater movement of the diaphragm than is possible with regular inhalation and exhalation. Whatever the precise reason, however, a number of students who have suffered from constipation have reported significant improvement with regular practice.

From a therapeutic point of view, regular practice of t'ai chi chuan is beneficial to the young and old and women and men alike, and particularly for those who are, for whatever reason, unable to participate in more strenuous exercises. As I have suggested, the benefits for healing illness and promoting health are particularly associated with t'ai chi breathing. The contraction and expansion of the diaphragm and abdominal muscles more generally constantly change abdominal pressure. Where the pressure is high, the veins more readily carry blood back to the heart; when, on exhalation, the pressure is relieved, blood circulates back to the abdomen. Moreover, the movements of the diaphragm have the effect of massaging the liver, thus strengthening its cleansing function. Even greater benefit comes as the student learns to coordinate proper breathing with the specific movements of t'ai chi chuan. Doing so assists metabolism at the cellular level by causing even more efficient distribution of blood throughout the body.

Besides in these ways improving circulation, strengthening muscle tone and relaxing nervous tension, regular practice of t'ai chi chuan improves concentration as well, because the student must learn consciously to control both movement and breathing as well as to banish all irrelevant thoughts while training. Unlike some forms of exercise, the movements of t'ai chi chuan are directed by the mind and emphasis is placed upon intelligent movement instead of on brute strength. For example, in all t'ai chi movements, the eyes, hands, waist, legs, feet, and, more generally, the upper and lower, front and back, and right and left sides of the body should all move in a unified and coordinated manner. As noted above, each movement should flow smoothly into the next, and at no time should the student cease his or her movement from one posture to the next. Perfect equilibrium throughout the movements should ideally be maintained by perfect concentration, and although the movements should eventually become a matter of second nature, they are never to be performed absent-mindedly. In this way, t'ai chi chuan guarantees exercise for the mind as well for as the body.

A more precise explanation of the sort of breathing encouraged by proper training illustrates more deeply the mental aspect of t'ai chi chuan. This form of training calls for deep, quiet, long, and gentle breathing. "Deep" means that, on inhalation, the breath should be consciously (by the mind or "I") directed to sink down to the lower abdomen (or "tan tien") and from there down to the soles of the feet. On exhalation, the breath should be consciously expelled in the reverse direction. That the breathing should be "quiet" means that it should be slow and soft. That it should be "long" means that breathing should be done completely and without haste. Finally, that the breathing should be "gentle" means that it should neither stem from nor give rise to tension. This is the method of diaphragmatic breathing consciously controlled by the mind.

All practitioners agree that regular practice of t'ai chi chuan significantly improves a student's balance and poise. Faulty posture has a harmful effect on one's health more generally. Consequently, improving one's posture through practice of t'ai chi chuan contributes in this way as well to the student's overall health and well-being. Moreover, the student's improved balance and more upright posture does not rely solely upon skeletal support, but upon developing the core strength associated with strong and

healthy muscles of the abdomen, back, waist, and thighs. One clear benefit of the improved balance and core strength achieved by regular practice is that older students thereby significantly reduce the risk of crippling falls. More generally, however, it seems that improved core strength helps the body more generally fight disease and keeps the mind alert. T'ai chi posture is, then, an expression of mental and physical health that helps to bring about what it expresses.

As I said above, one's practice of t'ai chi chuan must evolve over time. In the beginning, the first thing to learn is how to harmonize the movements of the arms and legs. With time, the student must learn to generate these movements from the center of the body. In other words, movements of the abdomen and thighs are eventually to be expressed in the hands and feet. This is why the classic t'ai chi manuals emphasize that "when the body is placed in a disadvantageous position, its parts are in confusion, and the fault should be looked for in the waist and thighs." One's sense of the presence and the source of such confusion should grow with time. Its remedy involves all aspects of a person's mental and physical nature and demands the constant improvement of each.