

THE MOVEMENT OF LIFE

IT'S ALL THERE FOR THE TAKING. ADOPTING A TAI CHI LIFESTYLE BALANCES THE MENTAL AND PHYSICAL INTO A SEAMLESS FLOW OF POSITIVE MOVEMENT

By Edward Niam

A golden beach, the smell of salt air and bodies proceeding in unison with a dance-like motion; slow, graceful, deliberate movements advancing as a gentle wave. Like the ocean with no beginning and no end—only the perpetual flow of legs, arms, hands... The perfect balance of yin and yang energy, glistening in the light-emanating life.

Every step brings the flesh closer to the earth. Every breath reunites the soul with the heavens. Each figure is a unique personification of the universe with an endless yearning to blend its essence with the Great Ultimate, the "Tai Chi."

The foundation of tai chi began with the concept of yin and yang, the principal energy forces making up the universe. A circle divided equally by a serpentine line represents the yin and yang symbol. One half is black and one half is white.

Within each figure is a small circle containing the opposite color. This signifies that everything embodies something from its contrasting side. The curved line and the joining of the figures demonstrate a mutual need and interdependence of the two.

It is impossible to have one without the other. When the two halves of the yin and yang are in balance, the chi will be harmonious and the health at an optimum level.

Tai chi has been described as a moving meditation. This phenomenon develops naturally with the blending of the mind and body through the practice of the slow, rhythmic movements. The unique pace of tai chi helps the mind and body develop a special relationship as well as embrace and become one with the flow of the universe. As familiarity with the form

increases, the movements develop a natural rhythm and the state of meditation deepens. This causes many practitioners to experience a physical and emotional



exhilaration after performing tai chi.

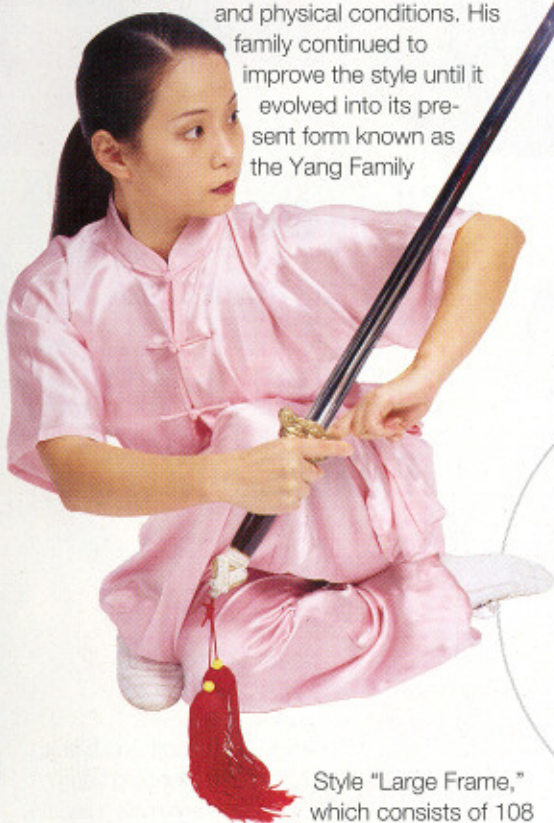
"In every movement the entire body should be light and agile and all of its parts connected like a string of pearls."

—Chang San-Feng

There are two major styles of tai chi. The Chen, created by Taoist Chang San-Feng, can trace its origins back more than 800 years. The Yang Family Style, originated by Yang Lu-Chan in the early 1800s, is the most popular form practiced today.

Yang Lu-Chan is credited with popularizing tai chi by drastically restructuring the form. By deleting several difficult jumps, leaps, and aggressive kicks and punches, he created a program suitable for all ages

and physical conditions. His family continued to improve the style until it evolved into its present form known as the Yang Family



Style "Large Frame," which consists of 108 continuous movements.

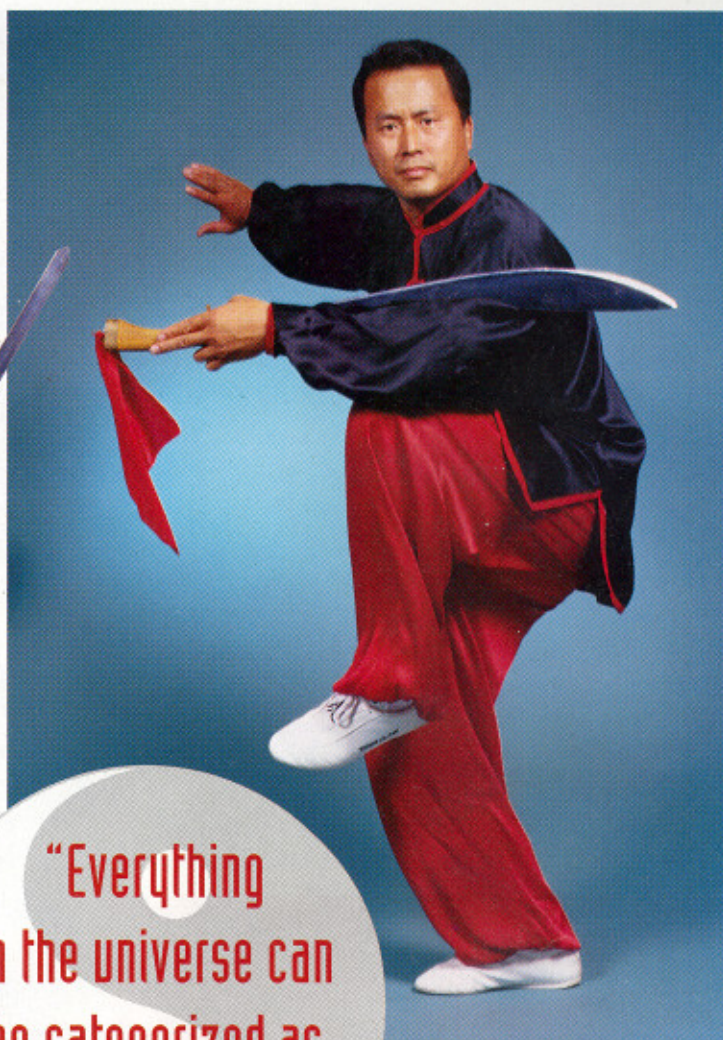
Tai chi chuan or the great ultimate fist was originally created as a martial art. The Yang style, also a fighting form, evolved into a comprehensive exercise program to improve health, cure illness and revitalize the mind, body and spirit.

"Tai Chi Chuan is an art with strength concealed in gentle movements, like an iron hand in a velvet glove, or a needle concealed in cotton."

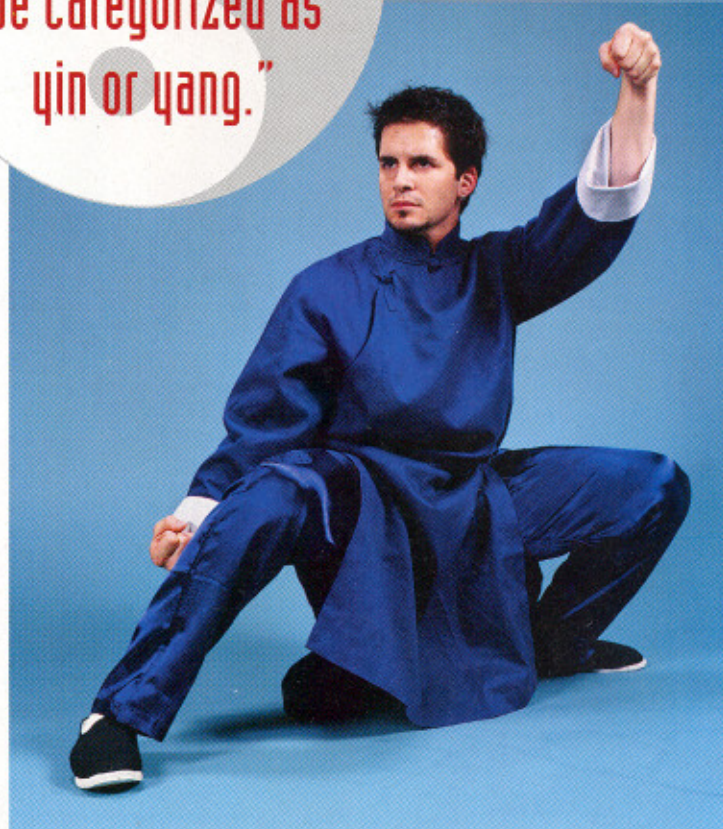
—Yang Cheng-fu

Tai chi also incorporates the Taoist principal of "wu wei," which translates literally as "doing nothing to disturb the spontaneous flow of things." When tai chi is performed with grace and intention, there is a natural rhythm that mirrors the ebb and flow of the Great Universal, the perpetual movement of energy in the universe.

The concept of yin and yang, the foundation of Chinese culture, metaphysics and medicine, is more than 3,000 years old. Everything in the universe can be categorized as yin or yang. Examples of yin are female,



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night, cold, soft and black; the corresponding yang energies are male, day, fire, hard and white. When yin and yang energies are balanced, all things are in harmony.

Tai chi is considered one of the nei gong or internal arts, meaning its primary focus is to develop the body from the inside out. This is in contrast to wai gong training, which emphasizes external muscle development.

Regular practice of tai chi has been proven to have many positive effects on the mind, body and spirit. Physical benefits may include improved posture, balance and flexibility, added strength and endurance, an improved digestive system, increased muscle and bone density, normalized metabolism and a stronger immune system. Favorable mental and spiritual results include relieving of tension and stress, releasing anxiety, creating a mind-body connection, enhancing focus and aware-

ness, removing energy blocks, gaining a sense of calmness and well-being and lessening mood swings. Tai chi has been proven to effectively treat chronic conditions such as arthritis, fibromyalgia and migraines.

The 108 continuous movements making up the Yang-style tai chi form are a perfect blend of yin and yang energies. The movements strengthen muscle tissue through the continuous tensing and relaxing motions; massage the joints through the slow, rhythmic transition from one movement to the next; and stimulate and exercise the internal organs, thanks to the gentle twisting and turning of the waist.

Improved breathing techniques contribute greatly to the overall benefits of tai chi practice. The internal organs work tirelessly in the background, mostly unnoticed until one or more begins to fail. Unlike external muscles, the organs are rarely exercised during Western-style calisthenics. Tai chi's unique approach not only strengthens muscles, bones and tendons, but also stimulates and rejuvenates the organs by employing lower abdominal breathing and an extensive range of gentle twisting movements.

In Chinese metaphysics, developing proper breathing techniques is one of the keys to good health. By inhaling deep into the lower abdomen, you are directing the chi to permeate and massage internal organs. As babies, we all breathed this way; however, the aging process and other learned behaviors caused us to inhale and exhale through the chest and ignore the organs. With practice, lower-abdomen breathing becomes natural and every breath exercises your internal body.

"Nei wai xiang he" literally means "inner and outer mutually combine." When the physical movements act in unison with intention, the form will be harmonious. "Yong yi bu yang li" translates as "use the mind instead of force." The mind is the engine that directs the motion of the body and the chi. In doing so, great power is generated without the use of physical force.

Physically demanding activities such as jogging, weightlifting or high-impact aerobics may not be suitable for everyone. However, the slow and evenly paced movements of Yang-style tai chi make it uniquely adaptable to the young, old, strong and weak. The intensity of the training can be perfectly matched to the age and health of the participant in much the



same way a dimmer switch regulates the brightness of a light. This means that all people—athletes, dancers, the elderly—will benefit from regular tai chi practice. With 108 movements, there is a broad range of motion that exercises every cell of the body at a level that reaches deep into the very core.

Yang-style tai chi is rapidly becoming an internationally popular exercise system. It is not uncommon to see groups of people in parks and neighborhoods moving gracefully through the form as one body, one spirit.

Besides the vast array of health benefits, there are many advantages to regular practice of tai chi. No equipment is needed, no membership to a gym. There are no special clothing requirements. All one needs is a comfortable outfit that allows a wide range of movement, and a pair of athletic shoes.

Any moderately sized space with a flat surface will work as a makeshift training facility. Tai chi can be practiced alone or with others, in silence or with music. Since a warm-up is not necessary, the form or individual movements can be performed anywhere, anytime.

Through tai chi, a mind/body connection develops that is unlike any other. The slow, relaxed pace of the form creates a unique bond where the mind sees the movements and transfers that vision to the physical body. With practice, the mind and body begin to act and react as one entity. When this stage is reached, there is a deeper understanding of who and what we are. The purpose of our existence and the nature of our relationship with everyone and everything around us become clearer.

Who should do tai chi? Young and old alike will benefit whether it is your primary form of exercise

or simply added to an existing program. The key is blending regular practice of the movements with meditation to attain a state of mindfulness. The goal is to allow the form to become a permanent part of your mind, body and spirit. To make this a reality, you must take the

first step, which is to find a qualified instructor to begin your journey of knowledge and learning.

THE ESSENCE OF TAO

Looked at but not seen:

Its name is formless.

Listened to but not heard:

Its name is soundless.

Reached for but not obtained:

Its name is intangible.

—From the "Tao Te Ching" by Lao Tzu

The Tao—the Way—is there for all of us. It is simply a matter of choosing the right path and experiencing the journey with all our hearts. Make tai chi a part of your Tao. ☯

Edward Niam is founder of the Institute for Self Healing in Hudson, Ohio, and creator of TaiQiGong Fitness Systems, a unique program for all ages that blends the healing qualities of tai chi, qigong, meditation, shaolin kung-fu and Traditional Chinese Medicine to fine-tune and recharge your mental, physical and spiritual health. He can be reached at (330) 342-0838, edniam@instituteforselfhealing, or www.instituteforselfhealing.com.

