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Tai Chi and Health

Taichi is an ancient martial art, practiced in China for centuries. Many travelers to the Orient are familiar with the early morning sight of elderly Chinese people performing slow, graceful, dance like movements in parks throughout Asia. In British Columbia, one need only visit Queen Elizabeth Park around 7 o'clock in the morning to see our own Chinese-Canadian community practicing tai chi and other martial arts.

The exact origins of tai chi in China are obscure and surrounded by mythology. One legend claims that tai chi was started by a hermit, Chang San-feng of Wu-tang mountain, in the 14th century. Supposedly, the originators of tai chi studied the natural environment, and especially the movement of animals, to create tai chi postures useful in combat. Even today, various positions are given colorful names such as 'snake creeps down', 'monkey stepping back', 'rooster stands on one leg', and 'white crane spreads its wings'.

Some practitioners believe that the real originator of tai chi was Ch'en Wang-t'ing in the 17th century. He founded what is now termed Ch'en style tai chi, and his home village is now a popular tourist attraction for martial art enthusiasts. In the early 19th century, two contemporaries, Yang Lushan and Wu Yu-hsiang, learned tai chi from the Ch'en masters and subsequently became famous in their own right. Traditionally, tai chi fighting skills were kept in the family and transmitted from generation to generation. Thus, today there are three main schools of tai chi, Ch'en, Yang, and Wu. Yang style is probably the most popular in North America.(1)

A health-promoting activity

Originally created as a martial art, tai chi is now taught primarily as a health promoting activity. Chinese concepts of health and illness differ from our western ideas. The Chinese believe in a universal energy called chi. (This word chi is different in meaning from the chi in tai chi.) Chi energy surrounds us and is found in all living things. Chinese medicine teaches that illness is an imbalance in the body's chi circulation. Chi circulates in the body through several channels or meridians. Along these meridians are points that can be used to influence chi flow and alter the balance. Chi energy can be thought of as similar to electromagnetic energy. Just as electricity has positive and negative energies, chi consists of opposite energies called yin and yang.

There are many ways to influence yin-yang balance. Acupuncture is one such technique. Traditional Chinese herbs are another. Tai chi is an exercise that strives to accumulate chi, store it, and circulate it through the body in balance. According to Chinese tradition, this can maintain health, prolong life, heal others, or be utilized in combat. It is not a coincidence that most of the tai chi players in Chinese parks are senior citizens. Because tai chi uses chi energy rather than strength, increasing age is not a limitation.

Growing body of literature

It is not easy to validate the many health claims of tai chi using modern Western research techniques. The fundamental philosophies are very different. Nevertheless, there is a growing body of literature about tai chi and its medical applications. All manner of illnesses have been researched, mostly in China, but also in North America and Europe. Benefits have been claimed for joint disorders, heart disease, hypertension, substance-abuse disorders, and stress-related illnesses, to name just a few.

In the May 1996 issue of the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society, Wolf et al. concluded that moderate use of tai chi can favorably influence defined biomedical and psychosocial indices of frailty in an elderly population.(2) The occurrence of falls can be significantly reduced, and the authors felt that tai chi 'warranted further study'.

In the same issue, Wolfson et al. studied seniors who undertook balance and strength training followed by maintenance tai chi exercises.(3) They found that tai chi maintained benefits obtained through other training approaches. They felt it was a simple, cost-effective, low-technology approach that is readily available in most North American communities.

Channer et al. studied tai chi use in the period following myocardial infarction and found that regular tai chi exercise in the post-MI period is associated with falls in blood pressure.(4) They suggested that tai chi may be a useful alternative to formal aerobics as part of a cardiac rehabilitation program.

Lai et al. concluded, from a prospective study of tai chi practitioners, that tai chi may delay the decline of cardiorespiratory function in older individuals.(5) They also stated that tai chi is a suitable aerobic exercise for older adults.

Kirsteins et al. studied tai chi exercises with people suffering from rheumatoid arthritis.(6) Tai chi appeared to be a safe alternative exercise for this group of patients and may be part of a rehabilitation program.

The authors implied that tai chi may stimulate bone growth and strengthen connective tissue, but cautioned that this needed to be documented by future studies. The few studies cited above give some idea of tai chi's potential health benefits. It should be clearly understood that tai chi can be an adjunct to Western medicine but not a replacement. The integration of tai chi with Western medicine may further assist a patient in the healing process.

Tai chi is best studied from a qualified teacher or tai chi master. Many communities teach tai chi through community colleges or recreation centres. Classes are usually held once a week, and the student is expected to practise at home once or twice daily for 15 to 30 minutes. As mentioned, there are many different forms and styles, which is sometimes confusing. Some instructors teach a long form consisting of 108 separate movements; others favor a short form of 24, or 37 postures. The number of positions is not important. The ability of the teacher to inspire the students and teach softness and relaxation is primary. The focus of teaching should be health benefits rather than martial skills.

Sometimes teaching must be modified to accommodate a patient's particular health requirements.

Once the basics are learned, the tai chi practitioner can regularly enjoy a time-honored and proven skill that is life-enriching and health-promoting.

Tai Chi and Health - References:

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