

T'ai Chi Basics

What is t'ai chi?

Perhaps the best way to describe it is “moving meditation.” Participants move slowly through a set series of positions, flowing from one to the next with focus and balance. Each move has symbolic significance, and eventually, one learns to synch up the body, breathing and eye movements, enhancing relaxation, flexibility and wellbeing.

How will t'ai chi help me with my physical challenges and limitations?

Studies have shown that it can improve energy, balance, flexibility, strength, blood pressure, heart rate, mental and emotional wellbeing, body awareness and more. Specific studies have been published recently to show its beneficial effects on stroke recovery, fibromyalgia pain mitigation, arthritis, depression and more.

I don't think my balance is very good. Is t'ai chi OK for me?

The moves can be modified for those with balance and mobility issues, using chairs and supports or scaling down the movements themselves. T'ai chi does contain many instances of shifting weight from one side of the body to the other, but students will learn to move from the body's center and with intent, not fear.

Faith Gregor's personal experience recovering from back problems, including two surgeries, helps her to help others cope with the mental and physical challenges of regaining flexibility, strength, balance and mobility.

What kind of physical shape do I need to be in to take t'ai chi?

It's for all abilities. Whether you've been inactive, injured, or are simply looking for a new activity, t'ai chi is great. In fact, being athletic—or not—has absolutely no bearing on your progress with t'ai chi!

What should I wear to class?

Wear clothes you can move freely in. There are special t'ai chi shoes available, but for the first class, socks or bare feet will be fine.

What is the class format?

We'll start with 5-10 minutes of stretching and warmups, then do the form for about 20 minutes, followed by a short break, then about 20 minutes additional practice. It's usually done standing, but if you wish, seated modification can be done or chair breaks can be taken any time.

What is the instructor's background?

Faith Gregor has studied t'ai chi since 2000 with Maedée Dupres, an internationally known t'ai chi instructor, dancer and choreographer. With Ms. Dupres, Faith became a certified instructor with Open Wings T'ai chi Studio in Denver. She teaches the Yang style long and short forms, honoring the traditions of Ms. Dupres and Gerda Geddes, who began studying T'ai chi Ch'uan in China in 1949 and was the first person to teach the form in England.

What is the instructor's philosophy?

Faith's mentors are dancers. T'ai-chi ch'uan is the body expressing the art and harmony of yin and yang, in tangible form. It embodies the dynamic balance of yin and yang: lightness and rootedness, the human condition from birth to death; power and yielding. The beauty of t'ai chi is that it's a wonderful all-over exercise (using more muscle groups than almost any other), and you can go as deep as you want into the symbolism and spirituality of it. It absorbs all of you: body, mind and spirit.

On a practical note, Faith is empathetic, insightful and patient. She breaks down each move into manageable parts. You'll find that you learn a lot from watching your fellow students, and lessons are designed to keep participants engaged but not overwhelmed. Practice on your own is optional but encouraged if you find it helpful.

What is the history of T'ai Chi?

There are many conflicting stories from the past, so it is difficult to get the full story. There are many variations of t'ai chi; the Yang form is taught by Faith Gregor at Anchor Physical Therapy.

The foundation concepts of t'ai chi ch'uan come from Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism and go back to the beginning of written history in China. They come from Lao Tzu's monumental text, Tao Te Ching, from the I Ching and from various other health-promoting and breathing exercise treatises.

The actual art can be traced back only about 700 years. The founder is said to be Chang San-feng (Zhang Sanfeng), who is thought to have lived from 1279 to 1368, but no one knows if he actually existed. Some experts claim him as just being a myth, while others argue he did exist and there are monuments to him in China.

Many believed Chang San-feng was a Shaolin monk who decided to leave the monastery to become a Taoist hermit. On Wu Tang (Wudang) mountain, he gave up the hard fighting style he had learned and formulated a new art based on softness and yielding. One story tells how he had a dream about a battle between a snake and a crane. In theory, the crane should have had an easy time killing the snake, but in Chang's vision, the crane would try to attack the snake's head, and the snake would evade and hit the crane with its tail. As the Master slept, Yu Huang, the 'Glorious Jade Emperor', visited Chang in his

dreams and instructed him, teaching him the secrets of the Tao that the bird and the snake innately knew.

Chang sprang up from his sleep wide-awake and inspired by his Celestial Visitor, and immediately set about the creation of a new Martial Art form with Chi, at its root. This art held that 'yielding overcomes aggression' and 'softness overpowers hardness.

He is believed to have written:

"In every movement, every part of the body must be light and agile and strung together. The postures should be without breaks. Motion should be rooted in the feet, released through the legs, directed by the waist and expressed by the fingers. Substantial and insubstantial movements must be clearly differentiated."

Later, Chang formulated the postures of t'ai chi.

This long story is intended to show how the ideas of balance, flow and clarity— as well as the animal symbolism and powerful connection to the natural world. inform and enlighten the study of t'ai chi.

What does t'ai chi ch'uan mean?

There are several dramatic-sounding translations, such as "grand ultimate boxing," "peaceful harmonious fist" and "supreme ultimate fist." "Chi" refers to one's personal energy or life force, and in t'ai chi, participants use their energy in a balanced and harmonious way of movement.