

# AN INTRODUCTION TO TAI CHI CHUAN

By Dr Paul Butler

People who have seen programs on China may have noticed the slow almost dance like movements performed by people in parks and other open spaces. You may have no idea what these movements are for, or you may have thought that they are just some form of gentle exercise performed by the elderly. What you have seen being performed is the slow hand form of Tai Chi Chuan. Many people believe that this is all there is to Tai Chi - a form of exercise suitable for the old and infirm. It might surprise these people to discover that the translation of Tai Chi Chuan is Supreme Ultimate Fist (or Martial Art), and that Tai Chi is a martial art that at one time was taught to the Imperial Guard in China. How can these slow, dance like movements have anything to do with the martial arts, and how can they contribute to a person's health? The full version of Taiji as it is properly known should include several aspects as well as the taiji forms; it should be hard as well as soft, gentle as well as vigorous. A fully trained instructor will be teaching his students this way.

Tai Chi is said to have been founded by a Taoist monk named Chang San Feng in the 13th. Century. He combined the practice of martial arts with Taoist philosophy by showing how softness and gentleness can overcome hardness. This practice was performed for hundreds of years, in about 1660 the first formal Tai Chi system or style was formed by the Chen family in Chenjiagou in Henan, central china.

It is difficult to find a system of exercise that is suitable and challenging for both young and old that can also be used to aid people with specific physical ailments. It is practiced throughout the world for many reasons. Apart from being an aid to relaxation it is also an effective form of self-defense. It can also increase stamina, and improve a person's suppleness, balance and co-ordination. With daily practice a person's general health and vitality will improve. When practiced correctly, Tai Chi Chuan has another important advantage over many other exercise systems - it develops not only a healthy body but also an alert mind. So not only will the body feel fitter and more supple, the mind will also become more alert and able to concentrate better.

The Hand Form is the most basic and best known part of Tai Chi Chuan. The movements come in a set sequence or frame made up of different forms

and each form has self-defense applications. The Hand Form is normally practiced slowly as this helps to harmonize a person's thoughts and actions by allowing the body to constantly move in a smooth, relaxed manner. The practitioner can then concentrate on performing the form while being undisturbed by (although aware of) outside distractions. This helps to reduce tension and increase concentration and over time a person's body will become more relaxed and healthy.

Tai Chi Chuan promotes both flexibility and vitality. Most people's idea of stretching involves exercises like touching your toes or doing the splits. However with Tai Chi Chuan a system of stretching the body without moving a great distance has been developed. Instead of pulling directly on muscles and tendons, Tai Chi Chuan brings about stretching by influencing the nervous system.

For example, most people, because of the stress and tension in their everyday lives, hold their shoulders up to two to three inches higher than their anatomy requires. This restriction of the muscles results in more stress to the body's nervous system. Over a period of time this leads to the muscles concerned being chronically shortened. The tight shoulders affect the neck, which in turn affects the spine and hips. This affects the efficient functioning of the internal organs. In other words, stress in one area of the body can have dramatic effects on the health, posture and structure of the whole body. By correcting this one fault the neck and shoulder muscles are naturally stretched and this results in an increase in overall flexibility, and release of tension, benefiting the whole body.

The subtlety of the exercise lies in its slow continuous movement. Slow motion never lowers the intensity of the exercise, and in fact the slower the form is practiced the more energy is actually expended. Also with practice and experience the form will become more energetic. Slowness is essential for the brain to adjust and control the various physiological responses and allow the correct and natural movements to be instinctively learnt. This physical slowness helps to develop a mental calmness leading to awareness by relaxing the nerves and getting rid of anxiety and tension. The slow relaxed movements also help to strengthen the internal organs and increase the blood supply.

The slow hand form although the best-known part of Tai Chi is only one of many aspects of Tai Chi. The second aspect of the art, Pushing Hands,

when practiced with a partner helps to increase a person's sensitivity and reactions. In this way a person not only learns to control his or her own balance but also learns how to be sensitive to a partner's actions and balance, through this training the practitioner learns sensitivity to his/her environment also.

If a person wishes to learn self-defence techniques (taken from the Hand Form) they can do so once a certain level of competence in the Form and Pushing Hands has been achieved. These self-defence applications from the Hand Form are learnt one at a time, slowly at first and then gradually building up speed to a realistic pace as confidence increases. These techniques never use force against force, but will turn an opponent's strength against him/ her. Tai Chi Chuan is a non-aggressive martial art, and the practitioner will react to a situation or attack but will not instigate it.

There are three main Weapon Forms that are learnt once a certain standard in the Hand Form, Pushing Hands and Self-defence has been reached: the Spear, the Saber, and the Straight Sword. Also though in the Chen system there are further weapons forms these include the short and long staff, the taiji Ban and also the Guan Gun Daow. The Weapon Forms allow a person to control his or her flow of energy, balance and co-ordination and also help to develop stamina. Practicing the Weapon Forms can stretch out and relax the muscles and bones; promote the circulation of the blood and make the breathing smoother and longer. Tradition says that, "The sword nourishes the Chi, the spear promotes wisdom, and the saber cultivates resolve."

Finally, the last of the parts of Tai Chi Chuan are the Internal Strength exercises. This form of training has been described as moving meditation, where a tranquil state of mind is maintained while at the same time postures are held or movements are repeated.

When all these aspects of Tai Chi are studied together the result is a martial art that is suitable for young and old, male or female, small and tall alike that will not only offer the practitioner a sophisticated form of self defence but will also offer that person a more relaxed and healthy body, and a calmer more alert mind.