



**Moving
Meditation
Finding Strength
and Balance
with T'ai Chi**
By JILL DUBE

*Ian Gamble, founder and instructor at Full Circle Synergy in Portland;
(opposite page) Jason Grundstrom-Whitney*

Benefits of T'ai Chi include decreased blood pressure and better concentration.



Every day people of all ages all over the world practice the same meditative movements that monks mastered in the mountains of China hundreds of years ago.

As if in a choreographed ballet, the people move slowly and deliberately, focusing on each breath while carefully moving hands and feet in rhythmic motions as they perform their rituals and balance their inner selves.

T'ai Chi, a Chinese martial art form, might be an ancient exercise, but the positive effects of this "moving meditation" are gaining notice and popularity here in the United States.

For an exercise to be around for more than 1,000 years and still practiced by hundreds of

thousands of people all over the world, the health benefits must be significant. But what are they?

Ian Gamble, the founder and principle instructor at Full Circle Synergy in Portland, describes T'ai Chi as energy cultivation and preservation that helps strengthen weaknesses and balance strengths.

According to Chinese practice, the body has energy, called qi (pronounced "chi"), that flows throughout the meridian system—from the organs to the extremities. T'ai Chi works to keep the qi moving freely so that it does not become "stuck" within the body and turn into negative energy.

Chinese philosophy believes that when your qi becomes

blocked, you become tense, stressed, and unable to focus, which can lead to other health problems.

"Stability, balance, and circulation all help the body relax," said Jason Grundstrom-Whitney, a T'ai Chi student and instructor for more than a decade. "When your qi is blocked, it's like bending a hose—the water can't get through."

T'ai Chi keeps the qi moving by using breath, movement, and focus in a series of postures. Although the benefits of practicing T'ai Chi are still being studied, some are improved balance and flexibility, decreased blood pressure, and the ability to concentrate clearly.

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meditation,” explains Gamble, who has been practicing T'ai Chi and some of its related forms for more than 20 years. “It’s a self-healing practice that uses mind-body integration to balance the body’s alignment and improve its mechanics.”

Although T'ai Chi has gained popularity with aging Baby Boomers and senior citizens, it can be practiced by people of all ages who are looking for a way to relax and reconnect with their bodies.

“I’ve seen seniors gain mobility and stability through T'ai Chi, and it’s been helpful in easing anxiety and depression in high school kids,” says Grundstrom-Whitney, who teaches T'ai Chi through the Healthy Steps program at St. Mary’s Hospital and as an extra-curricular activity for high school students in Winthrop. “Once you get people to learn to relax—the neck, the shoulders, and other problem areas—the problematic areas start to dissipate.”

Grundstrom-Whitney emphasizes that T'ai Chi is a slow-moving exercise that takes patience to learn. It incorporates deep-belly breathing that is essentially the opposite of the shallow way most people breathe. “When you’re watching someone practice T'ai Chi, it seems so simple,” he says, “but when you get into class, it is extremely complex.”

Ideally, T'ai Chi should be practiced at least once a day, even if only for 15 to 20 minutes, in order to clear the mind and build on what was learned the day before. If your schedule doesn’t accommodate daily T'ai Chi classes, practicing T'ai Chi two or three days a week can still have its benefits, Grundstrom-Whitney says. “It eventually becomes a way of life. People start to relax and unfreeze.”

Both Gamble and Grund-

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strom-Whitney say that it is essential that a person learn T'ai Chi from a trained and qualified professional who is well experienced in the art form. "T'ai Chi is a fairly intimate practice," explains Gamble. "You need to be comfortable with the teacher and find a program that fits your needs." *

Tips for T'ai Chi:

1. Observe a class before starting, so you can get a sense of the instructor and the class. See what kind of tone the teacher uses when speaking and whether he or she smiles and seems relaxed. You should feel good about going to T'ai Chi class.

2. Make sure the instructor has learned and taught T'ai Chi for a number of years. If stances are not learned properly, knee problems can occur.

3. If you have physical disabilities or a limited range of motion, talk to your instructor prior to beginning T'ai Chi, so a program can be tailored to fit your needs.

Classes in your area:

Ian Gamble, Full Circle Synergy, Portland, 780-9581 (Classes also are offered in Yarmouth and Falmouth.)

Jason Grundstrom-Whitney, Eagle Bear T'ai Chi, Monmouth, 933-6751 (Jason also teaches through the Healthy Steps program at St. Mary's Hospital.)

Priyadarshi George, Arts of Living Learning Center, Augusta, 623-2180.

Al Gardiner, Wu Hsing Shan School, Bath, 443-2893.

Dr. Zhao Mei, holistic health practitioner, Portland, 775-1142.

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