

## What do you consider to be the main benefits of Tai Chi in today's modern world? – By Fernando G. Echeveste

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*“I **learnt** about the history of Tai Chi and I **understood** its philosophy, principles and benefits. The main benefit though is when I **experience** it during my practice and as a way of life.”*

If we go online and type “*Benefits of Tai Chi*” on the search engine of our choice, we will find many references, from virtually unknown websites describing its benefits to more popular websites such as the NHS Choices in the UK. Also listed in the results of the search engine will be websites linked to reputable institutions such as Harvard University and the internationally famous Mayo Clinic in Minnesota or websites linked to dot-com corporations such as WebMD. The information is abundant and we are not even considering other traditional sources like printed books and magazines or published papers. The benefits of Tai Chi are many and they span in all directions as we will see here.

These days most of the Tai Chi practise in the Western hemisphere is for well-being and relaxation. However, Tai Chi is an internal martial art that originated in China sometime in the 16th Century. It has been practised by successive generations as a means of self-defence, health improvement and inner cultivation. There are different styles (with smaller or larger movements) and forms (short forms with 24 or 37 movements or long forms with hundreds of movements). Most of these forms and styles come from the same origins and embrace the same principles and philosophy. They all focus on essential points (such as relaxation and mind-body connection) which ultimately are aimed to unleash the many benefits to the body (such as flexibility and balance), to the mind (such as clarity and peace of mind) and to the spirit (such as emotional stability and a sense of joy). Nowadays, there’s more and more growing evidence that the practice of Tai Chi has value on treating and preventing many health problems.

Tai Chi is not a “*Quick Fix*” like Matthew Rochford mentioned in his “*Tai Chi and Meditation*” interview in YouTube. It is a gradual process but one in which the practitioner can start feeling the benefits from day one. It is true that a beginner practitioner can feel intimidated by the choreography and find learning the form challenging at times. However, that doesn’t mean he/she can’t start reaping the benefits right away. Furthermore, with discipline, dedication and regular practice, the movements and the choreography are learnt and they become familiar and more natural allowing the practitioner to go deeper by refining the movements and by focusing more on the essential points in the practice of Tai Chi. Let us elaborate more on these essential points.

During the practice of Tai Chi, the movements happen at a slow pace allowing the practitioner to concentrate and to bring awareness to the body movements (kinaesthetic awareness). A correct posture and alignment allows the whole body to relax, releasing any tensions in the body. In Tai Chi the movements come from the centre of the body, effortlessly, without twisting the body awkwardly or causing excessive strain in the joints. Then there’s a synchronisation in the movements and as the body moves and turn from the central axis, the hips and shoulder move as one. The practitioner can feel a sense of connectedness between the upper and lower body as well. By working on the essential points and by refining the form, the movements become fluid and smooth. The slower the practice the quieter the mind becomes. When the mind is still and the body is relaxed, the breathing becomes deeper and the Qi can sink down towards the lower Dan Tian. The practitioner can then achieve a meditative and peaceful state. No wonder Tai chi is often described as “meditation in motion”.

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Refining the movements to a high degree and mastering the essential points in the practice of Tai Chi may take a while and some people may not even achieve that level in their lifespan. For those not achieving that level, does that mean they failed? Does that mean they couldn't receive the benefits? The answer is: No it doesn't. But let us talk about the most significant benefit of Tai Chi in today's modern world first.

What I consider to be the main benefit of Tai Chi reveals itself before us. Tai Chi in today's modern world is accessible to the masses. It originated in China but it's no longer the jewel of a family that kept it secret for generations, nor an exclusive commodity of a country looking for its nationalism and identity. Tai Chi developed and evolved within the context of the political, economic and cultural transformations in the Yuan, Ming and Ch'ing dynasties, and later during the Republic and the Cultural Revolution in China, but thanks to teachers like Yang-Ch'eng-fu (1883-1936) who was among the first teachers to offer Tai Chi instructions to the general public, Cheng Man-Ch'ing (1902-1975) who devised a short form of 37 movements, the promotion of a new shorter form of 24 movements made available to the masses by the People's Republic of China in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and many other teachers who helped to export and divulge the art in the West, Tai Chi is nowadays one of the many contributions China made to the world in recent past.

Be that as it may, Tai Chi is an art that keeps developing and evolving, and just as with anything that opens up to the general public and reaches rapid growth and expansion, the possibilities for contributors making contributions to the art are endless. For that reason Tai Chi will keep branching out, developing and evolving even much faster than before. However, one should not see this as a threat but as a corollary benefit to embrace with the hope that the principles and philosophy of Tai Chi (which has its roots in Taoism and the concept of Yin and Yang) and a lineage (which provides the historical background and gives prestige, character and reputation to a form, a style or a school) will be sufficient to form together a solid framework to support and give direction to this rapid evolution. It is important to acknowledge nevertheless, that within this framework Tai Chi offers the flexibility to be easily adapted to anyone, from healthy people to people confined to wheelchairs or recovering from surgery. Meanwhile, we really shouldn't be concerned about a form or style evolving and walking away from the principles of Tai Chi as it will no longer be Tai Chi. One thing we should be cautious about though is the dodgy sources of information, substandard schools and dishonest instructors hijacking or tweaking the principles of Tai Chi for their own benefit.

Getting into the context of the practice, another main benefit of Tai Chi is that from the first session the practitioner can start reaping all the other benefits for the mind, body and spirit. That is true for practitioners coming from different conditions and backgrounds or practitioners with different goals and expectations. For example, for someone feeling lonely or struggling with depression, joining a Tai Chi class for the pure aspect of socialising can be very beneficial. As Matthew said in his interview, Tai Chi is still relevant to the challenges we currently face in the modern world such as fear, stress, anxiety, depression, worry, etc. From a physical perspective, Tai Chi becomes even more relevant to the diseases that are characteristic of our current lifestyle such as Alzheimer's disease, Arthritis, atherosclerosis, asthma, some kinds of cancer, Type 2 diabetes, obesity, etc. There are testimonials of people claiming their flexibility and balance improved substantially after attending only a few Tai Chi sessions. Furthermore, according to recent medical studies, when combined with standard treatment, Tai Chi appears to be helpful for some of these medical conditions.

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There's evidence that Tai Chi addresses the key components of fitness — muscle strength, flexibility, balance (thus, reducing falls), and, to a lesser degree, aerobic conditioning. Additionally, the gentle movements in Tai Chi combined with breathing and a relaxed mind and body seem to bring benefits for a healthy living (such as releasing toxins from the body, releasing tension, bringing clarity to the mind, relieving emotional problems, strengthening the immune system, improving posture, improving quality of blood, increasing digestion and assimilation of food, making the heart stronger, etc.). It then appears that the benefits of Tai Chi are more effective if the practice begins before one develops a chronic illness or functional limitation.

The main benefits of Tai Chi can be seen from different angles. From the historical context of the art and its evolution to the context within the practice itself. Tai Chi is accessible and achievable. It's fluid and smooth. It's meditative and peaceful and it sets up the ideal conditions to bring plenty of other benefits to the mind, body and spirit. Best of all, with the regular practice of Tai Chi such benefits appear to have a cumulative effect for a long, healthy and happy living.

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