

Your Tai Chi Companion

Part One – Getting Started



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Yiheyuan Martial Arts

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Who is this guide for?

This guide is for you, if you are thinking of taking up Tai Chi.

It's designed to help you to:

- Find out what Tai Chi is.
- Find out if Tai Chi might be right for you.
- Find a suitable class.
- Have some idea of what to expect before you start.
- Get the most from your first few lessons.

It answers questions which thousands of students around the world have asked as they set out to explore the mysteries of Tai Chi.

Why do people do Tai Chi?

All over the world, people are beginning to recognise the health benefits of this ancient Martial Arts discipline. Older people are being advised to practice it to reduce their likelihood of falls, improve their balance, posture, co-ordination and breathing, lower their blood pressure and even strengthen their bones and joints to help to prevent arthritis and osteoporosis. Some people are doing it to increase their confidence, happiness and self-esteem while others are finding that the calm, mindful, meditative movements help them to sleep better and cope with the hectic pace of modern living.

And all of this is quite apart from the obvious benefits of learning one of the oldest and most effective self-protection systems in the world.

Yet, strangely, very few people have any clear idea about what it is.

So let's start by asking: "What is Tai Chi?"

What is Tai Chi?

Tai Chi Chuan (Pronounced “Tie Chee Chew-wen” and meaning “Supreme Ultimate Boxing”) is an ancient Chinese Martial Art.

It doesn't matter if you're not interested in learning to protect yourself, because Tai Chi movements are normally performed so slowly and precisely that it can also be used as a gentle form of exercise, suitable for people of any age or level of fitness. In fact many people only practice it or teach it for health and relaxation, though you can learn it for self-defence if you want to and there are many teachers around who can help you to train in these skills to a very high level.

Whatever inspires you to join a Chi class; you will begin by learning a “form”: a sequence of slow, flowing, continuous movements which relax, strengthen and energise your body while allowing your mind to rest, which can help to improve your sense of physical and mental well-being. This effect may carry over into your daily life so that you tend to move more gracefully, without unnecessary effort, whatever you are doing.

Every movement in a Tai Chi sequence flows into the next without interruption. This continual motion represents the nature of the universe: the interplay of the opposite extremes of yin and yang. Tai Chi is the journey from stillness to movement and from movement back to stillness, or Wu Chi, allowing the discovery of a profound peace in which we become “centred” and are able to find the point of balance in everything.

Instead of being caught up in the highs and lows of life like a cork in a stormy sea, we become aware of the still, deep waters beneath the surface and are unaffected by the rise and fall of the waves.

For many people all over the world, Tai Chi is a way of life.

Will Tai Chi be good for me?

Tai Chi movements are normally practiced very slowly and carefully in order to develop precision, breath control, balance, co-ordination and internal power. This makes it an exceptionally useful type of gentle exercise which scientific studies¹ around the world have proved to be of considerable benefit to the health and well-being of regular Tai Chi practitioners. Some of the reported benefits include:

1. *Lowered blood pressure and improved circulation.* Tai Chi is recommended by the British Heart Foundation to people suffering from heart failure.
2. *Improved balance and co-ordination.* Tai Chi has been found to reduce the number of falls experienced by older people, including those with Parkinson's disease. This is the main reason for its recommendation by the Osteoporosis Society and by many physiotherapists. It is also weight-bearing exercise which would be expected to help to keep bones strong and healthy.
3. *Improved flexibility of joints,* which makes Tai Chi particularly helpful in the prevention and treatment of arthritis.
4. *Improved posture* due to the gentle bending of the knees and dropping of the tailbone, allowing the spine to settle into a natural, comfortable alignment and reducing pressure on the lumbar vertebrae. Tai Chi also encourages the release of tension in the muscles, particularly in the shoulders, neck and back. Many of our students have reported relief from back pain since taking up Tai Chi. It also relieves the pain and fatigue of fibromyalgia.
5. *Tai Chi breathing increases lung capacity* and calms the mind, which may explain why we have found it to be of benefit to people who previously experienced respiratory difficulties such as asthma.
6. Tai Chi students frequently report that they have gained inner confidence, alertness, self-awareness and improved self-esteem. Many say that they are sleeping better. Deep relaxation and mental quiet allow the world to be seen from a clearer and more balanced perspective; therefore it can help to calm a fiery temper, reduce anxiety and lift depression.

Who can do Tai Chi?

Everyone! Tai Chi is suitable for most individuals of any age but if you have any medical problems which you feel may interfere with your ability to do Tai Chi, or if you are concerned about how Tai Chi might affect you, please discuss these concerns with your instructor (and your GP or Physiotherapist, if appropriate).

If you are unable to walk, you may still be able to benefit from the upper body movements of Tai Chi while sitting in a chair, armchair or wheelchair. At Yiheyuan, we have devised stationary or chair-based versions of some of the Tai Chi sequences so that people who are unable to stand can still potentially attain mastery of the internal principles of Tai Chi Chuan. You just need to find a class in a venue which has wheelchair access. Some groups are specially set up for older people and people with mobility problems. These are often run by community centres, action groups, local authorities and care homes. Check with your local council or health authority to see what is available in your area.

How do I find a Tai Chi class?

The best place to start looking in the UK is the Tai Chi Union for Great Britain. Most good teachers in this country are registered with the TCUGB and have either been recommended by some of the best teachers around or have undergone an assessment by the Technical Panel. This might not guarantee that your teacher will be brilliant but it can help to make sure that the person teaching you is actually doing Tai Chi rather than something they have made up!

For a list of registered instructors in your area go to www.taichiunion.com

Each instructor will usually have their contact details listed, such as a phone number, email address or even a website listing where their classes are.

What type of class should I join?

There are many different types of Tai Chi class, so when you are looking at what's available in your area, check out some of the following:

Health clubs. These often hire freelance Tai Chi instructors to provide classes as part of their programme. You may need to take out gym membership but some allow non-members to attend their classes on a pay-as-you-go basis, so it's worth asking. They will normally ensure that your teacher is properly qualified, insured and licensed; and of course you will also have access to all the other club facilities if you do join.

Privately-run classes. These are classes where the teacher hires a hall. They can be a little bit more expensive simply because the cost of hiring a hall can be very high. How much the teacher has to charge will depend on how many students they get on a regular basis. One way of ensuring that the teacher doesn't end up out of pocket on weeks where attendance is low is to pay for a block of lessons in advance, non-refundable. This may seem unfair if you have an unplanned absence but it helps to ensure that you still have a class to go back to.

Community groups. Many local organisations, such as older people's action groups, invite a Tai Chi teacher to run regular classes for their members. These may be based in community centres, church halls, care homes, schools or wherever sufficient floor space is available. Fees vary as some are entirely self-funded while others may receive grants or subsidies which help them to keep prices low.

Adult Education. Local Colleges may provide Tai Chi lessons for which you can enroll on a termly or yearly basis. These will run in line with school term times and there will be long periods during the school holidays where you have no classes, but on the plus side, fees tend to be reasonable and there may be reductions for older people or anyone on benefits.

Private tuition. Here you are paying for the teacher's time, so a private lesson will cost a lot more than a normal class. The advantage of 1-to-1 attention is that you are likely to progress faster but then Tai Chi is not a race – the skills are acquired slowly over months or years, so it's normally best to start by attending classes and only have private lessons if there are no classes available or if you need extra support with a specific aspect of your training.

What should I wear?

Just wear any loose-fitting clothing, (eg jogging bottoms and T shirt/sweat shirt) and flat, comfortable shoes or slippers.

Tight trousers and jeans restrict the movements too much. Your footwear needs to allow you to be balanced and comfortable and to “feel the floor”. Thickly-cushioned running shoes are therefore not recommended and anything with a heel is unsuitable. Heels can also damage the floor of the training hall.

What happens in a Tai Chi class?

A Tai Chi class normally begins with a series of *warm-up exercises* of different types:

- *Qigong (Chi Kung) exercises*: gentle movements and stationary postures which improve breathing, balance, coordination and whole-body awareness. They generally relax the body, calm the mind and help you to let go of any burdens you have been carrying around with you so that you can begin the Tai Chi in a state of peaceful self-awareness. You may also hear that they “get your energy (chi) flowing.”
- *Exercises to warm up and energize the body*. These may include marching, jogging and gentle stretching and loosening exercises suited to the needs and capabilities of the particular group.
- *“Silk-reeling” exercises* which enable you to improve your flexibility and begin to develop a sense of whole-body connection and internal power.
- A *movement from the form* (Tai Chi sequence) may be repeated many times in the “warm ups” to allow you to become more familiar with it.

Most of the lesson will normally be spent in learning movements from a *Tai Chi sequence*.

In some lessons you may learn one or two new movements, so that the *length* of your sequence increases. In others your teacher may spend time helping you to perfect the movements you already know, correcting any faults and enabling you to *deepen* your understanding of internal principles.

In many ways, the depth of your understanding is more important than the length of the sequence or number of sequences that you practice. You can collect “empty” forms for decades without really scratching the surface of this art, while just a few movements practiced correctly and with deep appreciation of the internal principles can lead to mastery.

You may also be shown the *martial applications* of each movement and there may be the option of practicing your skills with a partner, though this is not compulsory. You may also wish, at some stage, to participate in “*pushing hands*”: a series of two-person exercises designed to allow you to develop sensitivity and explore the Tai Chi principles in greater depth.

At the end of the lesson, the class will normally *come to stillness together* in a standing or sitting meditation.

What’s the best way to learn Tai Chi?

It is impossible to learn Tai Chi from books, due to its complex three-dimensional nature and the need for errors to be corrected as you go along. The best way to learn it is by imitating the movements of a competent instructor, receiving their feedback on your progress and doing your best to follow their advice on how to improve.

However, there are Tai Chi DVDs, books and videos available which can deepen your understanding of Tai Chi during your training. These can also help you to make a start on your own if there is no teacher available, but do get someone to check you out whenever you have the opportunity.

Based on the experience of thousands of students before you, the following advice might be helpful:

- *Follow any instructions carefully* to avoid any unnatural twisting or pressure on the joints.
- *Give yourself plenty of time.* What is important is not the number of sequences you know but how you do them. You can become a master by learning one form well. It is better to take your time in learning each new movement than to rush through a form, learn it incorrectly and then have to re-learn it, which is much more difficult than learning it the first time.
- *Practice at home if you want to.* Practicing between classes tends to help your progress, once your teacher has told you that you are doing the movements correctly.
- *Enjoy your own journey.* It really doesn't matter if other students seem to be progressing faster. Tai Chi is a very individual process, like the opening of a unique flower, and there is no need to compare yourself with others on your uniquely personal journey.
- *Attend when you can.* Sometimes students have to miss a few classes due to holidays, illness or other commitments and then feel afraid to come back because they fear they won't be able to catch up. But Tai Chi is an individual journey; there is no one to catch up with! Your teacher will help you to continue from where you left off. There may also be other classes available if you want to attend more than once a week, and in some classes there may be assistant instructors to provide extra help on a one-to-one basis.
- *Let the experienced students inspire you!* Everyone in the class, including the teacher, has been where you are and they will all empathise with how you are feeling and be happy to help you to learn Tai Chi. If they make it look easy, so will you when you have been doing it a while and begin to inspire and support the newcomers!

How much attention will I get?

In some classes, everyone starts together as a large group, but in most classes new people start at different times, so there may be people in the class with very different levels of experience and skill, from complete beginners to advanced students and even instructors.

Due to the complex nature of Tai Chi and the different needs of individuals, it is not always possible for a group of students to progress at the same pace. Each person will progress according to his or her own needs, interests and aptitudes and you may therefore find that you work with different students at different times (and get to make more friends!)

You may be offered one-to-one or small group support from assistant instructors in the class, or your main instructor may show you a movement and leave you to practice while they go from group to group or person to person. This is very normal in any martial arts class and the idea is to practice what they have shown you many times so that when they come back to you, you have improved and they can then either help you to make further adjustments or teach you the next move. At other times you might join in with everyone and copy as best you can, which can help to give you more of an overall “mental map” of the sequence.

Your instructors will always make every effort to accommodate your individual needs as far as possible so that you derive maximum benefit from the classes, and they will welcome any feedback you give them about your expectations, needs and interests.

What if I can't do it?

Just do what you can. Allow yourself the time to enjoy each new experience as it comes. Tai Chi is not a race or a competition. Everyone goes at his or her own pace and that's one of the reasons why it can provide such a welcome respite from the hectic whirl of our daily lives.

Listen to your own body and if anything feels uncomfortable, tell your teacher who will then work with you to find ways to make the movement more comfortable for you. We are all different and you know your own body better than anyone else. It may just be that your stance is a bit too narrow or your timing is a bit out, so it's best to ask if you are unsure rather than soldier on and end up with aches and pains which could have been avoided.

What if I can't remember it?

The study of Tai Chi requires considerable patience. If your memory isn't brilliant and you struggle to remember the sequence, that's OK: the sequence is less important than the quality of your movements. Focus mainly on doing the movements safely and enjoying each one as you go along.

There are different stages of learning in Tai Chi. It may seem very mysterious and complicated at first, a bit like learning to pat your head and rub your tummy at the same time, but if you persevere you will find that you begin to see the underlying principles and the movements will become easier, and eventually you will be able to do them without thinking.

What do all the strange words mean?

If you hear the more experienced students using various Chinese words or jargon, that's OK. You're not expected to know these when you first start.

Some Chinese words may be used because they don't have an English equivalent, such as the *dantien* which refers to a region of the abdomen, centered on a point about an inch below the navel. This is believed to be the centre of power in the body and it is used extensively in the higher skills of Tai Chi.

You might also hear people talking about *peng jing* (pronounced pung jing) or "ward off energy" which refers to the way an arm can develop a kind of springy resilience which can bounce opponents up and away.

In some classes there may be even be one or two people who like to show off a bit by peppering their conversation with Chinese words. They might refer to a broadsword as a *Dao*, for example, when they could just as easily call it a sword.

If you hear anything unfamiliar, just ask someone what it means. The person you ask might benefit from taking the time to explain it to you.

What are the Tai Chi Principles?

The main principles of Tai Chi, as described in the Tai Chi Classics², are those to do with how to stand and how to move. All Tai Chi practitioners try to follow these, whether they are doing it for self-defence or only for health and well-being.

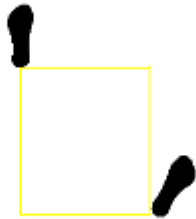
These are the “rules” which make Tai Chi what it is and allow you to gain so many benefits from it:

1. Your feet should be planted firmly on the ground as if you have roots into the earth.
2. Your knees should be unlocked and your weight sunk down into the legs as if you are settling into a comfy chair (sinking).
3. Your head should be held upright, as if suspended by an invisible piece of string from the crown-point, so that your gaze is level.
4. Your spine should be straight and upright with your tailbone dropped towards the floor. This will probably happen naturally if you do all of 1–3 above, and you will also find that...
5. Your body can then feel relaxed and supple and...
6. Your shoulders and elbows can drop and relax.
7. Each part of your body should then feel connected to every other part, “like a string of pearls” so that every movement comes from your whole body rather than just one limb.
8. When you take a step: let the waist lead, position the foot, then transfer the weight.
9. Direct the flow of movement through your legs, waist, arms, hands and fingers, like a whip.
10. With practice, your movements will then become balanced, smooth, co-ordinated, efficient and precise.
11. Eventually, your movements will become continuous and flowing, like a river, without interruptions or hesitation, so that someone watching you would not be able to see where one movement ends and the next one begins.

Don't worry too much about getting all of the above right from your first lesson. You will absorb them slowly as the weeks go by and then it will all start to make more sense.

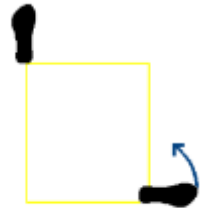
A few pictures may help to make the basic principles clearer:

Most of the time, your feet will be shoulder-width apart, which helps you to keep your balance.



In a basic shoulder-width forward stance, your front foot points forwards and your heels are on the diagonally-opposite corners of a square. Notice that the back foot is at a comfortable angle so that you don't strain your knee or ankle joints.

Leaving your back foot stuck out at right angles puts a twist on all your leg joints, so remember to bring the toes around with you when you change direction.



You can experiment with different angles until you find the foot position that's most comfortable for you.



When you "sit down" and relax into your legs in this position, as if you are in a comfy chair, your tailbone drops and your spine lengthens, relieving pressure on your lower back and allowing your vertebrae to move more freely. You can then turn your waist more easily and you become more stable, comfortable and balanced.

This is the main reason why Tai Chi has helped so many older people to reduce their risk of falling².

If you are interested in the self-protection aspects of Tai Chi, you can see that this position makes you less likely to be knocked over in a fight and more able to issue your own power against an opponent...



...whereas if you put one foot straight in front of the other, it's like walking on a tightrope, which stiffens your spine, puts a strain on your back and makes you more likely to wobble.



In Tai Chi sequences, most of the movements are circular and the hands often assume a “hold the ball” position.

Remember to relax your arms and shoulders so that your elbow drops and rests on the imaginary ball, while the other hand supports it from underneath.

This position is called “ward-off”. It illustrates some of the basic Tai Chi principles:

The spine is straight and upright and the tail bone is dropped.

The head is “suspended from above” and the gaze is level.

The feet are shoulder width apart, front foot pointing forwards, back foot turned to a comfortable angle.

Both knees are unlocked and the weight is sunk down into the legs. The front knee does not project further forward than the toes.

The shoulders are down and level and when an arm is raised the elbow normally remains lower than the wrist. The left arm forms a curve, as if holding a large ball against the chest.



Following these simple “rules” makes your practice more enjoyable, gives you the benefits to your health and well-being that Tai Chi is renowned for and also provides the foundation for you to further develop your skills towards mastery.

To help you to remember them, here is a rap poem which I once wrote for my students. If you learn this, and follow its advice, your Tai Chi journey should be a smooth one!

The Tai Chi Rap

Back

Keep it straight, and relax

Head

In a line with your back

Knees

Keep them soft, sink down

Feet

Keep them rooted to the ground

Let your waist keep turning

Like the coiling of a snake

Let your hands be as light as if

You're floating in a lake

Keep your shoulders down and level

Keep your elbows low

Like a puppet with no strings attached

To shoulder or elbow

Yield

To an incoming attack

Take it round in a circle,

Spit it out, give it back

Crouching low like a tiger

That's preparing for a leap

You can rise up like a dragon

That's been woken from its sleep

Be aware of all directions

While your mind rests in the void

And keep your sense of humour

So you never get annoyed

Stepping back from thoughts and feelings

Keep it real, keep it cool

Be aware of the connections

Of the drops within the pool

Keep the whole thing moving

And keep going with the flow

Without doing any doing

Without knowing what you know

When your mind is as calm

And as vast as the sea

Using power from your centre

You'll be doing Tai Chi

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If you are interested in exploring the martial side of Tai Chi, you will eventually have opportunities to work with a partner in order to explore how to use Tai Chi to protect yourself. This will be done through push hands exercises and the practice of martial applications.

The following are the main *Tai Chi principles relating to push hands and combat*.

1. Never meet force with force, always yield to an incoming attack.
2. Stick to your opponent.
3. Use his incoming movement to your advantage to unbalance him.
4. Redirect his movement by deflecting him past you or off to the side, (turn your waist).
5. If he tries to get away, follow. Allow him no escape.
6. To knock your opponent over, direct your power upwards, to uproot him.
7. Never leave your centre line (face, heart, groin) unguarded.
8. Look for “doors and windows” (exposed areas of your opponent’s body where a strike would be effective).
9. Be aware of every direction, in front, behind, right, left, all four diagonals, above, below and your centre.
10. Practice ward-off, roll-back, press, push, split, pluck, elbow-strike, shoulder-strike.

Where do I go from here?

Just enjoy the classes, practice what you are shown, ask questions if you want to, and speak to other students in the class if you get the chance. Some great friendships are forged in Tai Chi classes.

When you have been attending regularly for a while and you have learned a sequence, your Tai Chi skills will be increasing, you will feel more at home in your group and you will probably have experienced some of the benefits of doing Tai Chi.

The next guides in this series will delve more deeply into this amazing art and I’ll look forward to sharing that process with you when you are ready to go exploring!

References

There have been many scientific studies into the benefits of Tai Chi. This is just one recent example but a quick search on the internet will bring up many others. The Harvard Medical School has shown a great interest in Tai Chi in recent years.

1. News Review from Harvard Medical School, February 9th 2012

<http://www.intelihealth.com/IH/ihtPrint/WSIHW000/24479/36146/1428779.html?d=dmtContent&hide=t&k=basePrint>

The Tai Chi Classics have also been widely documented. The following is a good place to start, though there are many other good translations. It is from the Tai Chi Classics, such as the Treatise of Chang San Feng, that the Tai Chi Principles are derived. They may seem very mysterious and deep to start with but, once you grasp the subtleties of Tai Chi, these will all make sense to you and you will feel that you could have written the Tai Chi Classics yourself.

2. Tai Chi Classics, Waysun Liao, Shambhala 0-87773-531-X

Most of the material in this guide was first published on www.yiheyuan.co.uk in 2009 and some appeared before that in handouts issued to students in my classes.

This present, fully-revised edition was released on 4th May, 2012

More information about Tai Chi Chuan and related subjects can be found on our websites:

www.taichileeds.com

www.realtaichiuk.com

www.theonesong.weebly.com