

**UMass Dept. of Family and Community  
Medicine  
Spring Retreat 2014**



## **Tai Chi Workshop FAQ**

### **A Brief History of Tai Chi**

Tai Chi Chuan translates literally as “supreme ultimate fist”. The “chi” here is the ultimate fusion of Yin and Yang rather than “chi” as life energy as the term is now used. It is one of a group of “internal” martial arts. Tai Chi is an estimated 300-400 years old as a separate discipline. In legend, its origin is attributed to the Chen family after which the first of the major styles is named. The other two major styles are Yang from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Sun from the 20<sup>th</sup>. Through centuries and styles, Tai Chi has metamorphosed from the “fist” of a martial arts discipline to a gentle method for maintaining and improving health. Although different in many details, all three styles embody the same principles:

- Smooth, continuous motion
- Moving as if against gentle resistance
- Upright posture
- Attention to weight transfer
- Loosening the joints – song
- Quieting the mind – jing

### **Tai Chi for Health**

Tai Chi for Health as a distinct discipline was developed by Paul Lam, MD, a family physician in Sydney, Australia, and an international gold medalist Tai Chi master. Dr. Lam was a victim of the privations of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, suffering severe malnutrition from ages 2 through 14. As a consequence, his joint cartilage developed poorly so he developed osteoarthritis as young adolescent. He began Tai Chi to recover and maintain flexibility and strength. Despite his rigorous medical training at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, he was able to continue developing his Tai Chi practice, eventually winning gold in competition.

Wanting to give back to his patients and others suffering from arthritis, he developed the Tai Chi for Arthritis program in the 1990’s in cooperation with medical colleagues at the university and the Arthritis Foundation of Australia. He has gone on to develop additional programs such as Tai Chi for Diabetes, for Low Back Pain, and for Osteoporosis as well as Tai Chi for Kidz. Dr. Lam continues to emphasize and

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participate in evidence-based research on tai chi. He also developed his own principles for Tai Chi for Health:

- Safety – staying in your comfort zone, adapting the forms as needed, for example seated Tai Chi for those who cannot stand
- Enjoyment – if you don't enjoy the exercise, you are less likely to stay with it
- Focus on health rather than martial arts or competition

The Tai Chi for Health program is expanding world-wide. There are about 60 Master Trainers who can certify others to teach, more than 6000 Instructors, and an estimate of close to one million people who have participated in at least one Tai Chi for Health class.

A crucial aspect of the expansion is the teaching method Dr. Lam developed. He devotes the same attention to evidence-based research on teaching as to research on the health benefits of tai chi. Traditional tai chi teaching expects the student to observe and imitate the master and senior students as best one can; there is relatively little explicit instruction presented at the level of a beginner. If the student persists in imitation, then after five, ten, or twenty years, the student may finally learn the forms. In order to make Tai Chi for Health forms accessible for beginners, Dr. Lam developed the Structured Progressive Teach Method (SPTM, affectionately known as “spitum”) which supports safe, enjoyable learning from the beginning.

## **Research**

Although Paul Lam's discipline of Tai Chi for Health has done excellent work in making tai chi widely and safely available, it is far from the only effort. Many practitioners and researchers have devoted their work to demonstrating and disseminating the health benefits of tai chi. A local example is Peter Wayne, Ph.D. who is both Director of Research for the Osher Center for Integrative Medicine at Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women's Hospital, and the founder and director for twenty years of the Tree of Life Tai Chi Center in Somerville, MA.

Among the health benefits that have been shown by well-conducted research:

- Improved balance and motor control
- Reduction in falls
- Reduction of arthritic, fibromyalgia, and other musculo-skeletal pain
- Improved flexibility
- Reduction in blood pressure
- Improved aerobic exercise capacity in CHD and CHF

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- Improved respiratory function in COPD and possibly asthma
- Improved cognitive function in dementia
- Reduction in depression and anxiety in people with chronic medical issues
- Reduction in sleep disturbance and improvement in sleep quality

Clearly, conducting research on an intervention such as tai chi is difficult. Establishing appropriate control groups and isolating the intervention are both particular challenges. However, even the Cochrane has accepted that some benefits, such as reduction of fall risk, have been established. A number of major health organizations, such as CDC, have accepted and are promoting tai chi for some specific conditions. Continued efforts by workers such as Paul Lam and Peter Wayne, along with many others, will eventually establish other benefits.

## Conclusion



I hope this workshop has provided a useful introduction to tai chi and its benefits for health. My thanks to the UMass Department of Family and Community Medicine for inviting me to lead the workshop. For those interested in pursuing more details, there are gateways in the resources below. For those who would like to have this document in computer form, a PDF will be made available on the departmental web site.

## Resources

### Books

Lam, Paul, with Maureen Miller. Teaching Tai Chi Effectively, Revised; Tai Chi Productions, 2011 - <http://www.taichiforhealthinstitute.org/index.php>

Wayne, Peter M., with Mark L. Fuerst. The Harvard Medical School Guide to Tai Chi; Harvard Health Publications, 2013. (Contains 51 pages of notes and references) - <http://www.treeoflifetaichi.com/>

### Reviews

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Cochrane – Interventions for preventing falls in older people living in the community. Lesley D Gillespie, M Clare Robertson, William J Gillespie, Catherine Sherrington, Simon Gates, Lindy M Clemson, Sarah E Lamb Editorial Group: Cochrane Bone, Joint and Muscle Trauma Group. Published Online: 12 SEP 2012, Assessed as up-to-date: 1 MAR 2012, DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD007146.pub3, Copyright © 2013 The Cochrane Collaboration -

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD007146.pub3/abstract>

Roger Jahnke, OMD, Linda Larkey, PhD, Carol Rogers, Jennifer Etnier, PhD, and Fang Lin. A Comprehensive Review of Health Benefits of Qigong and Tai Chi; Am J Health Promot. 2010 ; 24(6): e1–e25. doi:10.4278/ajhp.081013-LIT-248.

### Example Research

Chenchen Wang, M.D., M.P.H., Christopher H. Schmid, Ph.D., Ramel Rones, B.S., Robert Kalish, M.D., Janeth Vinh, M.D., Don L. Goldenberg, M.D., Yoojin Lee, M.S., and Timothy McAlindon, M.D., M.P.H. A Randomized Trial of Tai Chi for Fibromyalgia; N Engl J Med 2010;363:743-54

### Organizations

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – A CDC Compendium of Effective Fall Interventions - <http://www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationalafety/Falls/compendium.html>

NIH-National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine – Tai Chi: An Introduction - <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/taichi/introduction.htm>

Arthritis Foundation - <http://www.arthritis.org/resources/community-programs/tai-chi/>