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Wu style Tai chi for older adults

By Master Henry Cheng

In China, public parks often contain groups of people performing slow, graceful and ballet-like movements in unison. Visitors often ask themselves, "What are they doing?" They are performing the movements of Tai Chi, more commonly known as Tai Chi Chuan. Tai Chi Chuan is an ancient art of moving meditation. Originating in China during the Sung Dynasty (960 - 1279 AD), a Taoist monk Cheung San Fung created it while looking for a suitable martial art for his Taoist Sanctuary. Legend says that he often observed long-lived animals such as the crane and the turtle. One night he had a dream about a snake and a crane engaged in a dance-like fight, and thus came the idea for Tai Chi Chuan.

In recent years, Tai Chi has been the focus of multiple research studies that have reinforced the value of this movement form for older adults and those with chronic conditions. The slow, smooth movements are within the capability of many older adults, including people who are more frail and over 80 years old. People feel they can perform Tai Chi movements, even if they do not feel confident with other forms of exercise.

Three main styles of Tai Chi have been passed from generation to generation: Chen, Yang and Wu. Chen tends to have larger, more explosive movements and can be quick or slow. Yang has much larger and slower movements, and a much wider stance and arm movement. Wu is a middle-stance style, having mid-paced, compact movements.



Among these styles, Chen is perhaps the earliest. Yang learned from Chen. Wu style evolved from Yang, and has further refined Yang in a number of areas. The primary differences are that Wu style uses shorter and more compact leg stances; emphasizes footwork, balance and stability; and makes a clearer separation of "active" and "passive" arm and leg movements.

There is also emphasis on the proper alignment of all joints in order to improve the cultivation and circulation of chi. Chi is loosely defined as essential life energy—the circulation of energy throughout the body that gives us life and health.

This article features Wu style Tai Chi. The characteristics of Wu style make it very appropriate for older adults.

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Benefits of Tai Chi practice

Wu Tai Chi is based upon precise movement, exact placement of the feet and hands, and a focus on energy without an expenditure of energy. In fact, students who learn the form and practice it correctly find a net gain in energy and a feeling of well being at the conclusion of the form sequence.

Tai Chi offers practitioners both physical and psychological benefits (4, 17). When practicing Tai Chi, students improve their posture, balance, strength, mind and body, reduce arthritis pain (6, 15, 18) and become more relaxed (18). With age, these basic functions can decline and result in serious falls, injuries, joint pain and stress.

Not only does Tai Chi help reduce falls (4, 8), but it also limits fear of falling (5, 9, 14). Practice improves balance, which is a physical function that helps prevent falls (2, 8, 9). It improves muscular strength and endurance and flexibility (4, 15, 16, 17) and has benefits for improving bone density and the musculoskeletal system (13).

The graceful, slow movements involve the mind and the body together. For example, while people may initially lose their motor skills from stroke or Parkinson's disease (3), in my experience students have used the slow Tai Chi motions to retrain their skills. In addition, remembering the 108 postures is good training for the mind.

Learning to correctly perform the 108 postures of the Wu style form is a practical way to learn balance, body alignment, motor control, rhythm of movement, and the cultivation of energy from the body's vital center. As Tai Chi has become more popular in the United States, the Tai Chi forms have become shorter. The shorter forms may be a good way to promote Tai Chi. However, the longer forms require more practice and more mental engagement and concentration.

Longer forms have advantages because they allow the mind and the body to interact.

Among my students, everyone learns the 108 postures, including those who are older, and who have conditions such as stroke, Parkinson's disease, and other illnesses. It may take them a little longer, but they all learn the form, and derive the benefits.

The goals of Tai Chi

- Every part of the body must stay loose.
- Every joint must maintain a slight natural curve.
- Avoiding quick, jerky movement helps to achieve a full range of motion.

How to approach the movements

It is very important for people to correctly perform Tai Chi. An incorrect approach not only minimizes benefits, it can cause injury.

To properly practice, you must understand every single movement within each posture. The qualified instructor will be able to explain the correct positioning as well as any possible harm from an incorrectly performed posture. Practice morning and night, twice a day. Practice 30 minutes each time, remembering to breathe naturally as you move through the posture.

The compact arm and leg movements of Wu style Tai Chi are intended to alleviate muscle tension and prevent hyperextension of the joints. Guidelines for this style include:

- No hyperflexion or hyperextension of wrists
- No elbow raised higher than the shoulder joint

If the student feels any tension, the movement is not correct.

Tai Chi movements assist the body in starting the blood flow and the energy (chi) to move throughout the body. In performing the exercises, do not force the movement. Let the movement be gentle, but directed.

Do not overextend the limbs. For example, when shifting weight forward, the knee

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should not move beyond the toes of the forward foot. Let the limbs go to their natural resting place or where you feel comfortable within a range of motion that does not go beyond the knee or behind the heel.

Choosing a teacher

To properly teach the movements to older adults, a teacher must have the appropriate training. Before choosing a teacher, it is helpful to understand how the system of training works.

Tai Chi is handed down from master to student. A master (“Lao Shi”) watches students as he teaches, looking at their knowledge of the form, but also at their attitudes. A master does not teach everything that he knows to all students.

After about 6 years, the master selects students to receive more advanced (called “indoor”) training. Perhaps one or 2 students in a master’s lifetime will be selected for the honor of learning all that the master can teach. The cycle begins again with the new master, who can pass his or her knowledge on to others.

There are no controls for Tai Chi teachers. Anyone can teach and anyone can claim that he or she knows Tai Chi. Ask how long the person has been teaching, who he or she learned from, and the style she or he teaches. Although not necessarily a reflection on the teacher, a style that uses hyperflexion and hyperextension is likely not the best fit for older adults, particularly if they are more frail.

A teacher who has learned from a master will make a connection between postures and chi and choose postures that do not block the flow of energy. He or she will be able to explain the purpose of each portion of the movement along with the common errors to watch for.

A good way to explore these areas is to visit the teacher’s school and watch one or more classes.

Trying Wu style Tai Chi

On the following pages, the basic posture of Wu style and the first movements are described. The descriptions and photos will give you an idea of how to perform the movements and visually explain why the style is appropriate for older adults. It is a style that can be performed without hand pain, joint pain or forceful movements that stress joints or muscles.

By trying the postures and the form, you will understand how Tai Chi is successful for improving strength, flexibility and balance, coordination and concentration. While photos are useful, the best way to experience Tai Chi is to visit a school and practice the form. Look for a Wu style Tai Chi center where you can watch the form and appreciate its value.

Henry Cheng is a fifth-generation Master of Wu style Tai Chi who has 40 years of experience. As a Master of Tai Chi Chuan in the United States, Master Cheng operates the Tai Chi Wellness Center in San Diego, www.taichimasterhenry.com, and teaches in the Active Older Adults program at the Mission Valley YMCA and through his television show on local cable television channels. He authored a train-the-trainer course for the Arthritis Foundation of San Diego and is currently involved in a research study being conducted at San Diego State University on the relationship between Tai Chi and bone density.

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Appropriate for



Athlete



Active now



Getting started



Needs a little help

Begin with good posture

Stand with **feet shoulder-width apart**, about one foot apart, feet parallel.

When one foot is forward and the other foot is in back, maintain at least 3 inches between the heel of the front foot and the toe of the back foot.

Relax the neck. Imagine that **the head is suspended**, as if a string is pulling from the top, with the chin neutral. Place your fist between the chin and the chest to find the correct space so the head is erect and aligned with the pressure point at the top of the head, called “bak voi.”

The “bak voi” is in a straight line with the spine, in a straight line with the tailbone. This allows the chi (energy) to flow freely without being blocked. Centering of the **tail bone** (coccyx) is very important to maintain alignment with the head.

Relax the muscles of the upper back and allow shoulders to relax to their natural state (no military erectness!), the arms and hands to hang loosely with fingers relaxed in a slight curve.

“Sink” the shoulders. Allow gravity to pull arms to their lowest natural position. There is no tension or forcing downward of the shoulders, arms, waist or other body parts.

Think of the body as 2 parts. The upper part is above the diaphragm and the lower part is the abdomen. Stand with the **chest completely relaxed** while maintaining a straight, centered posture (not stiff like a soldier standing at attention).

The correct posture is called the central equilibrium.

When you **breathe**, you will feel the air travel deep down to the lower half of the body and reach the “Dan Tien,” a spot 3 inches below your belly button. If the air always stays above the diaphragm, there is not enough oxygen to reach the 5 major organs: lungs, heart, liver, spleen and kidneys.

If you stand and swing your arms from the **waist** in a relaxed way, your arms will swing and flap against your body. This is the feeling of a “loose” waist. You will feel every single joint moving from neck, to spine, to hip, to knee, to ankle. The tail bone must be tucked in (pointing to the floor).

Hands are positioned in line with the wrist and forearm to avoid hyperextension. Pushing is done with the edge of the palm (the “drumstick”) rather than the flat part of the palm. Pushing with the side of the hand avoids wrist hyperextension, which breaks the flow of energy coming through the hands. An incorrect movement may cause pain in addition to eliminating the movement’s benefit.



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Tai Chi concepts

- “Loose” means relaxed, yet active. Joints and body parts move freely without being forced and without tension.
- “Sinking” means lowering into a relaxed position. For example, sinking the shoulders means allowing gravity to pull your arms and shoulders to the lowest natural position, without force.
- “Tiger’s mouth” is the name given to the natural curve the hand and wrist naturally form when relaxed. Maintain the relaxed tiger’s mouth hands throughout all the exercises.

Teaching points

- Clear your mind of restless thoughts before beginning.
- Perform the movements slowly and steadily, keeping a mindful eye on balance.
- Breathe naturally and deeply with long, smooth, even breaths.
- It is helpful to begin by facing the wall in a room so you can use the corners for reference. It is very helpful to face a mirror so you can check the postures.
- Do not extend the limbs beyond the points described in the postures. Fluidity and correct motion are more important than “stretching.”
- During movement, knees do not extend beyond the toes.
- The body remains erect, and does not lean backwards farther than the heels. Heels stay on the floor.
- Elbows always point down and are never elevated about the shoulder joint. Raising the elbow elevates the shoulder joints, which stops the flow of energy. If the elbows move too far away from the body to the side, the upper arms and shoulders become tense.

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Balance lessons

Right



Wrong



Keep feet about one foot apart for stability. If the feet are close together, you can tip to the side.

Right



Wrong



When you reach for an object, turn your body so you face the object, with feet apart for balance. Don't reach behind because it is easy to fall.

Right



Wrong



Wrong



The knee is in a straight line above the toe. If the knee extends over the toe, it is easy to fall off-balance. It can also cause injury. Keep the heels on the floor. If they raise, weight shifts to the toe and it is easy to fall forward—even if the knee is correct.

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First movements of the form

The following sequence demonstrates the first postures of the 108-movement form. The student can perform one posture over and over, or alternatively, connect them into a single movement.

Beginning Tai Chi

1. Stand with feet parallel, one foot apart. Arms and hands hang down, palms face back, fingers relax in a slight curve.
2. Slowly and smoothly raise arms to shoulder level, hands and fingers hanging down (palms facing down). Arms feel heavy; keep arms and fingers curved. Elbows sink down.
3. As the fingers near shoulder height, start to draw the hands toward the body in a circular motion so the fingers continue up and then toward the body at about chest height.
4. Visualize a basketball in front of your chest. Fingers touch the ball as they move in the circular motion. As you complete the circle, push the edge of the hands out (like you are driving a car, pushing the steering wheel away from you) until the arms are about 70% straight. The hands should be below shoulder height, not above them. Both elbows now point down with the arms and fingers slightly curved.

The palms push out with fingers relaxed and slightly curved in relationship to the palm. When you face a wall in a room, the right palm faces the left front room corner, and the left palm faces the right room corner.

Front view



1



2



3



4

Side view



Continued from page 7

5. Rotate the wrists until the thumb joint is up. Each hand draws a semicircle from chest height to hips while sinking the body. The right hand moves counterclockwise on the circle, while the left hand moves clockwise.

6, 7. End this motion with hands in a tiger's mouth resting at the hip joint bones. Bend your knees and sink your body slightly as your hands reach your hips. Knees cannot go beyond a vertical line with your toes (you should see your knee in line with its toe or slightly back, when you look down).

Tai Chi hands going out

8, 9, 10. Shift weight to the right leg, and test your balance before moving your left foot. Raise the left foot by lifting the heel first, and rotating the toe on the ground to maintain balance, and finally lifting the entire foot slightly (it appears as if you are sneaking or "walking like a cat"). Step forward with the left foot a natural walking distance (about one foot). The heel touches down first with the toes pointing up (relaxed, not stretched).

11, 12. Raise your left arm to chest level with the arm forming a semicircle. The palm faces the chest, left elbow sinks, and the point of the left middle finger does not cross the body midline. Raise the right arm and slightly touch the left arm with the outside edge of the right wrist (palm facing left) near the pulse point of the left forearm.

13. Turn the left foot, pivoting on that heel, pointing the toes to the right room corner. Place the toes on the floor.

14. Shift your weight to the left foot and keeping wrists together, move both arms together in a small circle (as big as a softball) in an inward, downward and outward motion. Lean forward by shifting weight to the right leg, which straightens as the left leg bends slightly (left knee points to the right corner).

Front view



5



6

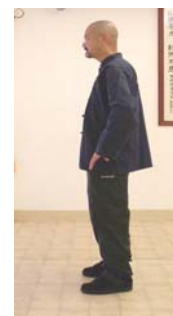


7



8

Side view



Front view



9



10



11



12

Side view



Front view



13



14



15

Side view



Check foot position



Place feet together, with the right foot heel at the midpoint (the middle of the arch) of the left foot. Rotate the right foot heel 90 degrees to the right, keeping the toe on the ground. Next, keep the heel on the ground and rotate the right toe until the foot points straight ahead. The feet are now one-half foot length apart in a forward/backward direction, and a full foot width apart in a side-by-side direction.



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Seven Star

15, 16. As you move the left arm closer to your left chest (fingers not crossing the midpoint), with the palm facing you, separate both hands, with the right hand moving toward the right wall, finishing when pointing at the right front corner of the room. Twist the right toe, and the whole body turns.

16, 17. Lift the heel of the right foot off the ground, pivot on the right toe and move the right foot to the right side. Land the right foot slightly to the right on the heel, keeping the toes raised. Push both palms to the center.

Check the foot position.

When the turn is complete, you will have started facing front and finished facing to the side.

17, 18. Bring hands together at chest level, arms extended 75% to 80% of full extension. The left hand is relaxed with palm facing right. The right hand is slightly in front of the left (left fingers are at the right-hand pulse point level) with palm facing left.

Elbows feel heavy and are sinking. Both palms maintain a semicircular curved shape.

Continued on page 1...

Front view



16



17



18

Side view



Performing the turn

This view shows the coordination of the hand and foot movements from a different angle.



1



2



3



4



5

Continued from page 10

Finish the movements

This is a modification of the form to end the movement sequence and begin again.

19. Pivot on the right heel until toes of the foot face toward the front and place foot on the ground. Raise the left heel and pivot on toes to face toward front.

20. Move left foot to starting position so both feet are about shoulder-wide apart. Weight is evenly balanced.

20, 21. Separate hands and move each in a shallow semicircle until hands hang at side as in the starting position.

Tai Chi moving meditation

While it is challenging to learn a form from photos, you can still see the weight shifts, turns and gentle muscular contractions, and understand how practice develops balance and coordination.

Tai Chi has many benefits for older adults, and is an activity that can be practiced over a lifetime.

Front view



19



20



21

Resources

EWTC European Association for Traditional Wu Tai Chi Chuan

English
www.wutaichi.org
German
www.wu-taichi.org

International Wu Style Tai Chi Chuan Federation

www.wustyle.com/

Tai Chi Wellness Center

www.TaiChiMasterHenry.com