Tai chi: the power of the slow

**Graham Osborne**

Tai chi, the slow-motion meditation being practiced in a park near you, can reduce stress, anxiety and depression, improve brain function and provide many other health benefits, according to scientific studies.

The ancient Chinese martial art of tai chi chuan has evolved into a series of mind-body exercises performed in a slow, focused and flowing manner designed to keep your body in constant motion and promote serenity.

Tai chi practice is said to support a healthy balance of yin and yang – opposing forces of shadow and light within the body – thereby aiding the flow of qi – a vital energy or life force.

According to a popular legend, a Taoist monk developed the first set of 13 tai chi exercises by imitating the movement of animals.

US medical research group the Mayo Clinic says the health benefits enjoyed by an estimated 2.5 million American tai chi practitioners include: decreased stress and anxiety; increased aerobic capacity; increased energy and stamina; increased flexibility, balance and agility; and increased muscle strength and definition.

[There is evidence](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/tai-chi/SA00087) that tai chi can enhance sleep quality and the immune system; lower cholesterol levels and blood pressure; improve joint pain; improve symptoms of congestive heart failure; and improve general wellbeing in older adults as well as reduce their risk of falls, says the Minnesota-based not-for-profit Mayo.

Web-based *Medical News Today* lists dozens of scientific studies that show health benefits associated with tai chi include: [helping patients with Parkinson's Disease](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/241439.php); i[mproving memory and brain function](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/releases/246802.php);  [relieving arthritic pain](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/releases/207055.php); and [combating](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/releases/219402.php) [depression](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/releases/176626.php).

A new Sydney University study, published in the [*European Respiratory Journal*](http://erj.ersjournals.com/content/early/2012/08/09/09031936.00036912.abstract), found that tai chi “significantly improved” exercise capacity, muscle strength, balance and quality of life for people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Study leader Regina Leung, a physiotherapist and PhD candidate in the university's health sciences faculty, said patients also reported improved concentration and decreased stress.

[Texas Tech University Health Services Centre](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/221901.php) published a study showing that tai chi boosted bone health and muscle strength.

"Participants taking tai chi classes also reported significant beneficial effects in quality of life in terms of improving their emotional and mental health," researchers said.

Hospitals from Brisbane to Toronto are turning to tai chi to help patients suffering from chronic pain.

“The Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital is at the cutting edge in their inclusion of tai chi as part of their intensive pain management programs,” said Taoist Tai Chi Society of Australia executive director Peter Cook, who teaches at the hospital.

“All the joints are put through a full range of motion, helping to lubricate the joint surfaces. The stretching works on the muscles, tendons and connective tissue throughout the whole body, with benefits for posture and spine.

“The slow, controlled stepping helps develop leg strength, balance and co-ordination, which has been shown to reduce the risk of falls.

“Tai chi has become increasingly 'mainstream' and recognised by both health professionals and the public as highly beneficial,” Cook said. “Tai chi helps to reduce stress and improve concentration. The continuous flowing movements have a calming effect on the mind and can improve mood and cognition. For those interested, tai chi can also be a path of spiritual development.”

Said 70-year-old rock legend Lou Reed, who has practised tai chi for 25 years: “People think I lift weights but I don't.”

Reed told [beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Celebrities/Meditating-On-The-Wild-Side.aspx?p=2) that tai chi had made him “mentally and physically stronger. It physically changes your body and your energy. I do two hours a day, every day. If I miss a practice, my body starts to hurt. It used to be the other way around.”

You can teach yourself tai chi using videos, but practitioners recommend joining a class and learning from an experienced teacher.

People of all ages and fitness levels can practice tai chi – indoors or out, either alone or in a group - but the Victorian government's [Better Health Channel](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/tai_chi?open)advises to check first with your doctor if you are over 40, overweight, suffering from a chronic illness or haven't taken regular exercise recently.

[An Introduction to Tai Chi](http://www.smh.com.au/tv/health/tai-chi--an-introduction-3112236.html) and [Tai Chi for Beginners](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nNWPk6tYoUM) are both great introductory videos to the art, or you may prefer the [car-park style of actor Keanu Reeves](http://amazingmomentsz.blogspot.com.au/2010/11/see-keanu-reeves-practicing-tai-chi.html), whose directorial debut, *Man of Tai Chi*, is due for release next year.