

Grasp The Needle From The Bottom Of The Sea

By Richard A. Peck

Mention exercise and most individuals will agree that it is good for them. Mention Tai Chi Chuan and most Americans will not agree or even know what it is and what it can do for the mind and body. Mention Tai Chi Chuan to practitioners of this art and they will extoll the virtues of this low impact exercise. So rewarding is the experience that millions of people from diverse cultures and backgrounds participate in this slow, graceful and meditative form of exercise.

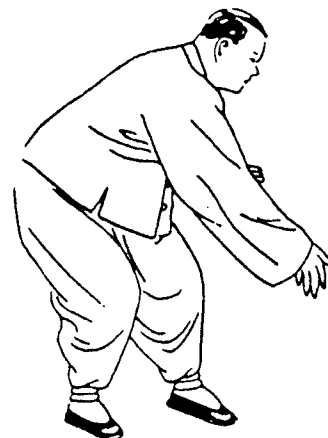
Our modern thinking on the methods and philosophy of exercise has changed over the years. What we see in vogue today may not be in favor tomorrow. The emphasis is now on aerobic type exercise for the heart. In contrast, Tai Chi Chuan has stood the test of time: the original principles, practices, methods and philosophy has changed little since its creation in the thirteenth century. The benefits that are extolled for aerobic type exercise can also be had with Tai Chi Chuan. In general, the practice of Tai Chi Chuan elevates the heart rate, strengthens the blood vessels and arteries, imparts greater muscle tone throughout the body, increases balance and centering, improves posture, reduces stress, improves mobility, relieves pain, builds energy and reduces fatigue.

How is this all possible? The ancient practitioners of Tai Chi Chuan noted that in many ways the practice of Tai Chi Chuan produced results that were similar to acupuncture. It would balance out the energy in the body so that the body could return to, or maintain, a healthy harmonious rhythm. If a patient was being treated for back pain, the acupuncturist would treat the underlying problem to relieve the pain. The theory being that an external or internal factor has caused a blockage of energy along one or more meridians. In conjunction with the treatment, the acupuncturist would

teach the patient Tai Chi Chuan which would keep the energy flowing and prevent the blockage from recurring.

Of the numerous benefits of Tai Chi Chuan, one of the most dramatic is the increase in mobility experienced by those suffering from arthritis. Common to most arthritic patients is swelling and deformity in the wrists, hands, elbows, knees, ankles and hips. The swelling is caused in part by the degenerative process of the disease. As the swelling and deformity progresses, the patient feels increased discomfort from hard impact exercise. Later, so-called "low impact" exercises and simple movements bring about varying degrees of pain. As the pain increases, the willingness to exercise diminishes leading to greater immobility and later, more pain. It is a vicious cycle that can in many instances be substantially reduced. Acupuncture can reduce the swelling and alleviate the pain so that the patient can again move with some degree of comfort. The Tai Chi and its auxiliary exercises slowly increase the range of motion so that limited motion, which was once painful, can now be done with substantially less pain.

Other than arthritis, the most common physical complaint is back and leg pain. It is so common that virtually everyone will at one time or another experience some difficulty with one or the other. The movements of Tai Chi Chuan are designed to strengthen the muscles in the body, and the back and leg muscles are the first to be benefited. The reason that Tai Chi Chuan is such an all-round good exercise is that it can be done by everyone, and the movements can be executed in high, medium or low positions. For beginning students and those with back or leg problems it is not necessary to go low. In fact, for some students, all that is required is that the move be done technically correct regardless of the depth of movement or range of motion.



The Tai Chi movement, "Grasp the Needle from the Bottom of the Sea," is an example of a move that is usually done low, but with minor modifications can be done from a complete standing position. After only a short time of Tai Chi instruction, students usually comment that their legs are much firmer and thinner, and that their back muscles seem to be stronger. Many with prior history of back pain report a substantial decrease in pain.

Many patients report that acupuncture imparts a deep feeling of relaxation, a release from stress and tension. As a means of stress management, Tai Chi Chuan can accomplish similar feelings of relaxation, peacefulness and stress reduction. The movements of Tai Chi Chuan are done slowly with natural breathing. The Muscle Meridians which are connected to the overall meridian system of the body are stimulated through the movements.

Those that practice Tai Chi Chuan come from all walks of life, but all agree that stress management is one of the main reasons they continue practicing Tai Chi. Comments such as "I feel much better control and am able to control my stress," and "it helps me make better decisions since I am more relaxed," are often heard by those who practice this art.