

## Excerpt from Integrative Healing

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# INTEGRATIVE HEALING

Developing  
Wellness in the  
Mind and Body

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# CHAPTER 7

## TAI CHI FOR HEALTH

This chapter was completed with the assistance of Derek Plonka, DPT, MTOM, L.Ac, CSCS. Dr. Plonka is a physical therapist and acupuncturist with over 20 years of experience in treating musculoskeletal conditions and movement disorders. As a physical therapist, he has been practicing privately in Santa Monica, California, since 2004 at the Insight Wellness Clinic ([www.InsightWellnessClinic.com](http://www.InsightWellnessClinic.com)) and in 2015 he completed his Masters in Traditional Oriental Medicine at Emperor's College of Traditional Oriental Medicine (ECTOM). He remains involved with ECTOM, for which he serves as the Doctoral Program Faculty and CAPSTONE Advisor, helping students mesh together an understanding of Eastern and Western Medicine. It is his multi-faceted approach to patient care which lends a unique perspective to his contributions in this book.

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*“Empty your mind, be formless, shapeless—like water.  
Now you put water in a cup, it becomes the cup;  
You put water into a bottle it becomes the bottle;  
You put it in a teapot it becomes the teapot.  
Now water can flow or it can crash.”*

—Bruce Lee

Tai Chi is a traditional Chinese martial art in which a series of slow, controlled movements helps improve balance, relaxation, mental concentration, flexibility, and strength (Venes 2017). Tai Chi is sometimes considered mind in action or meditation in motion (Chow 1982).

The exact origin of Tai Chi is unknown. Chinese legend has it that it began about 800 years ago, when a Taoist priest named Zhang Sanfeng witnessed a fight between a bird and a snake. He became fascinated by the fluid motions both animals used in going from offense to defense. Over a period of several years, he experimented with various forms until he developed what is now practiced as Tai Chi.

Today, there are several styles of Tai Chi, such as the Yang, Chen, Wu, Hao, and Sun styles, with some forms having more than 100 postures and movements. Traditional styles are associated with family surnames: Chen, Yang (most popular form), Chuan, Wu, and Sun (Kit 2002).

## Z ALTUG'S PERSPECTIVE FOR DOING TAI CHI

In my clinical practice as a physical therapist, I typically recommend Tai Chi to patients and clients who need to improve posture and balance, manage stress, and work on mobility. Other general reasons to try Tai Chi include (Bottomley 2017):

- Relieve stress and tension
- Improve overall health
- Improve flexibility
- Improve breathing
- Improve strength
- Improve endurance
- Improve posture
- Improve balance
- Improve coordination
- Improve circulation
- Help manage pain
- Help prevent falls
- Help manage weight
- Help find inner peace
- Improve socialization (when performed in a group setting)
- Provide a low-cost and low-tech activity

## DR. DEREK PLONKA'S PERSPECTIVE FOR DOING TAI CHI

As a physical therapist at heart, my emphasis is to assist with skilled intervention to resolve what a patient can't treat for themselves and progress them toward an independent home exercise program. Most importantly, the patient must be able to comply with the prescribed home program. Many patients have come to me with multiple pages of home exercises, practically the kitchen sink, and are only performing one or two with some regularity. They typically exclude the most important ones because it feels to be too challenging for them. As you have read from the history of Tai Chi, there are a number of styles and short (24 postures) to long forms (more than 100 postures). For a person just beginning or one with



cognitive deficits, even 24 postures can be overwhelming. For this reason, later in this chapter I will outline the Ezy Tai Chi style.

## LET'S SEE WHAT RESEARCH SAYS . . .

- Tai Chi may be effective for improving balance, strength, and flexibility while decreasing pain and fatigue in women with fibromyalgia (Wong et al. 2017).
- Tai Chi can reduce stress levels in healthy individuals (Zheng et al. 2017).
- Tai Chi may be a good way to slow down the age-related decline in muscle strength in a community-dwelling population (Zhou et al. 2016).
- Tai Chi can be helpful for improving fitness and arthritis in older adults (Dogra et al. 2015).
- Tai Chi and functional balance training benefit older individuals with polyneuropathy (Quigley et al. 2014).
- Tai Chi has had modest positive effects on functional status of individuals with Parkinson's disease (Choi et al. 2013; Li et al. 2012).
- Speed and accuracy in math computations has been attributed to the possible relaxed state from a Tai Chi or yoga class (Field et al. 2010).
- Tai Chi can be useful in the treatment of fibromyalgia (Wang et al. 2010).
- Tai Chi can improve the quality of life for individuals with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) (Yeh et al. 2010).
- Tai Chi can lead to balance improvements in people with chronic strokes (Au-Yeung et al. 2009).
- Tai Chi improves balance and helps people maintain good postural stability (Li et al. 2008; Mak et al. 2003, Tsang et al. 2004).
- Tai Chi can be beneficial for reducing falls (Li et al. 2005; Voukelatos 2007).
- Tai Chi can improve sleep quality in older adults (Li et al. 2004).
- Tai Chi can improve a person's arthritic symptoms (Song et al. 2003).
- Tai Chi can have a positive effect on the immunity that protects against shingles (Irwin et al. 2003).
- Tai Chi has been shown to slow the loss of weight-bearing bone in postmenopausal women (Qin et al. 2002; Chan et al. 2004).



## PRACTICAL TAI CHI ROUTINE

The following basic Tai Chi routine was designed by Dr. Derek Plonka for you to use in the comfort of your home or at a local park.

A number of years ago, I (Derek Plonka) came across what is called the “Ezy Tai Chi” which consists of only eight postures (Fisher et al. 2004). By