



Why Tai Chi?

What Our Students Told Us

by

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Yiheyuan Martial Arts

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While Tai Chi is normally suitable for people of all ages and levels of fitness, if in any doubt, please consult a medical professional to check that it will be suitable for you before you start.

To the thousands of students who have shared the journey with us, and to you, the traveller ready to set forth.

Acknowledgements

Our heartfelt thanks go to all the people involved in bringing together this little book to enable others to follow where they have walked and become part of the global Tai Chi family.

We would like to thank all our students, especially the sixty-five who took the time to complete our questionnaires, and managed to return them to us before the pandemic confined us all to our homes, and who kindly gave us permission to share their thoughts with you. Thanks guys.

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Who Is This Book For?

This book is for you:

- if you have ever thought about taking up Tai Chi,
- if you have ever wondered what Tai Chi is and what it could do for you,
- if you have toyed with the idea of going along to a class but not known where to find one,
- if you have found a class but have not yet been along to it because you don't know what you might be letting yourself in for,
- if you went along to a class but gave up because it all looked a bit complicated, difficult or confusing.

If any of the above apply to you, and you are still wondering if maybe you are missing out on something that might be enjoyable, interesting and possibly very good for you, then you are exactly the person we have written this book for, and your Tai Chi journey may well be about to start.

It was like driving through a waterfall in the darkness. The windscreen wipers, at full speed, were struggling to cope as I tried to peer through the wall of water and the fog up ahead and slowly made my way around the ring road. Should I have cancelled the class? "It's too late now to get in touch with everyone," I told myself. "Never mind though; nobody is going to venture out on a night like this just to do Tai Chi!"

I pulled into an area of the hotel car park that was still above water and turned off the engine. "No, definitely not. Nobody will show up tonight. Just go inside to confirm that no one is there and then go home and get warm." I opened the door, braced myself against the cold and forced myself to brave the icy deluge and dash across to the health club entrance.

Inside, it was warm and brightly lit. The guy on the desk was smiling. "Good crowd tonight", he said cheerfully. I peered into the lounge as fifteen happy people looked at me and waved a cheery greeting.

"WHY?" I thought. "What brings all these people here week after week, year after year - even decade after decade in some cases - sometimes in arctic blizzards or raging storms like tonight? What gets them up and out of the house on Saturday mornings, or inspires them to trail out in the dark after a long day at work, when they could be enjoying an extra hour in bed or snuggling on the sofa in front of the TV"?

So, I asked them.

"Because we love it," they said.

So what is it that our students love? What is it about Tai Chi that motivated the five hundred or so people who were attending our classes all over the city prior to the pandemic? What caused them to come back when the lockdowns lifted? What motivates the millions who practice all over the world and those who came before them?

We have thought long and hard about this. We know that our martial art is seriously awesome, with its many benefits to physical and mental health and well-being. We have written several books about that. Since 1992, we have trained thousands of students and instructors and we have always done our best to help every student to meet their social, physical, intellectual, emotional or even spiritual needs. We know

that our students are awesome too, which is particularly apparent when they turn up to a late evening class in a blizzard!

Yet, after all these years, we still find ourselves astonished, at times, by their sheer enthusiasm and dedication. Where exactly is that enthusiasm coming from? We wanted to find out.

Another question that has been in our minds for some time is: what about the people who never got started?

For every student who has stayed with us for months or years, several gave up right at the beginning. What happened to them? We don't "chase people up" to find out what put them off - we realise that Tai Chi might not be everyone's cup of tea - but we have often wondered why so many people decided that it was not for them. We know about the few who looked in through the door and went away again because they wanted "something more aerobic", but what of those who stayed for an hour, or who even came back for a week or two, before they gave up? Was there something we could have done that might have made their first experience of our art more enjoyable and encourage them to stay with it long enough to experience the benefits?

And what about other people out there who might have thought about trying Tai Chi but have no idea about where to find a suitable class: or those who know where the classes are but have not yet got around to going along to one? What could we do, we asked ourselves, to make the undoubted benefits of Tai Chi more accessible to more people?

Setting out can be a bit like a surfer fighting through the breakers to reach the calm, deep waters beyond so that they can enjoy the ride of a lifetime. How could we help people to overcome their initial fears and get started on their own personal Tai Chi Journey?

From these questions came the idea of writing a small guide in which we would try to answer these perplexing questions.

Rather than sit down and try to answer these questions ourselves, however, we decided to ask our students.

What did they find scary or daunting when they came along to their first class? What was it that inspired them to come back the next week? What has kept them coming back for weeks, months, years or even decades?

So, we printed off a few hundred questionnaires and gave them to our students, asking them to cast their minds back to when they first started learning Tai Chi,

however long ago that was. Then we pinned back our ears, ready to listen to what they had to say. Their enthusiasm was overwhelming! “You could call it ‘Tai Chi for the Terrified’” they said. “What a great idea! Yes, we would like to be involved with that.”

What actually happened, that very same week, was a Covid-19 epidemic that closed all our classes overnight. In those few days before lockdown, sixty-five completed questionnaires had come back to us – only a small proportion of those that went out but still a representative cross-section of our students, including all age groups, genders and backgrounds, with levels of experience ranging from a few weeks to over two decades and levels of ability ranging from complete beginner through to experienced instructors.

Into those single sheets of A4 they had crammed so much wisdom and experience that we felt we must share it with the wider world!

In the coming pages, we will give our students a voice and share with you some fascinating insights we have learned from them that can benefit you, as a person who is interested in learning a little more about, or even thinking of taking up, Tai Chi. Once you know a bit more of what it’s all about, you may well find that you are ready to find a class in your local area and are prepared to give it a go.

But now it’s time for us to hand over to our students, who would very much like to share with you their thoughts on why they believe that starting your own Tai Chi journey would be well worth your while - and how best to go about it. While we have offered a little background information to tie it all together, it will be mostly written in their own words. Most of our students were happy for us to quote them and only a very few wished to do so anonymously. The brackets after their names show the length of time have been doing Tai Chi.

“I have always been interested that there is something “deeper” to it than just an exercise or even a martial art. I feel so lucky and blessed to have Tai Chi in my life and to have found teachers and fellow pupils who have helped me to learn this beautiful art. To have something in your life that enhances it so much and that you love and are passionate about is something to be VERY grateful about.”

Kath P. (20 years)

Part 1 - Why Bother Learning Tai Chi?

We could launch straight into all the good stuff about the amazing benefits that you can expect from doing Tai Chi but it would probably be more useful to you if we start by telling you what it is that we are talking about!

What is Tai Chi?

If you were to ask a thousand people what Tai Chi is, you would probably get a thousand different answers. For each person, Tai Chi will be a uniquely individual journey, yet their answers will have many things in common.

Typical responses will include:

- It's a gentle exercise system that anybody can do.
- It's a type of mindful, meditative movement.
- It's like a slow, graceful dance.
- It's a Chinese Martial Art.

And most might say “All of the above” because that's true. It is all those things and more. So, whatever you are looking for in Tai Chi, you are likely to find it – which makes it sound very mysterious.

Believe it or not, under all that seeming complexity, there is something very straightforward and down-to earth. To practice Tai Chi, you learn how to move in a particular way that follows a few simple rules: the so-called ‘Tai Chi Principles’. The back remains straight and upright while the body relaxes, the shoulders and elbows drop downwards, and the knees flex a little so that standing up and walking around become almost as comfortable as sitting down. That's the first quality that makes it so different from many other types of exercise.

Each movement is done slowly so that you can really take your time to fully appreciate the feel of it. Although each movement was designed as a means of defending yourself, it is so relaxed and enjoyable that it becomes a type of mindful, meditative practice while, at the same time, training precise skills that could be useful in certain challenging situations.

The words “Tai Chi” can be translated as “Supreme Ultimate”, and the full martial art is known as “Tai Chi Chuan” or “Taijiquan” which means “supreme ultimate fist.”

This rather grand title can be interpreted in the light of its role as a complete fighting system but also as a philosophy leading to “enlightenment”.

The movements are strung together in sequences, making them easier to remember and allowing you to experience how they flow continuously without stopping, like a river. It takes quite a bit of time to learn a sequence but when you get the hang of it and you can join in with a group, it can give you a great feeling of togetherness with your classmates and the millions of practitioners who practice that same sequence throughout the world.

Where did Tai Chi come from?

Tai Chi was developed in China as a method of self-protection. Historians have traced its origins back to at least the twelfth century AD, though they do tend to disagree a little on the exact source. Overall, though, legend has it that it began when a wandering sage called Chang San Feng witnessed a fight between a snake and a crane, which inspired him to copy their movements as a means of self-protection. Whether or not this is true, or whether it simply developed out of some of the existing combat and meditational methods and styles, in its present form it has been passed down through schools and families to the present day, resulting in a few broad family styles and lots of variations of these.

Much has been written elsewhere about lineages and history, and we have suggested some further reading at the end, if that interests you, but what we want to focus on in this book is what Tai Chi has to offer you personally and how you can get started if you would like to give it a go.

What’s so special about Tai Chi?

Although it is a martial art, possibly one of the oldest and best in the world, it has lots more going for it than self-defence alone. It can be done very slowly and it is all done standing up; so if you can walk, you can do Tai Chi. If you are unable to walk, you can still do the upper body movements while sitting down. Some of our students are wheelchair users.

How can Tai Chi help you?

The best way we can answer this is to let our students speak for themselves about what it has done for them. Here is what they said.

What has kept our students coming to our classes for years and years?

Enjoyment

The word that cropped up most in our survey was “enjoyment”, with a hundred percent saying that they enjoyed it and some saying they “love it!” (with a big exclamation mark) so there’s a good chance that if you take up Tai Chi, you will find it enjoyable.

But why do our students enjoy it so much? Let’s look for some clues in their responses.

Physical health

Practically everyone we asked said that perceived benefits to their health and well-being were among the things that kept them coming along to Tai Chi classes every week. Here are some examples.

“I enjoyed the movements and felt so much better in the afternoon.” Shirley L. (8 years)

“Health reasons mainly. I was advised by my specialist that Tai Chi was the best form of exercise for me, for strengthening the core and improving balance, which has certainly worked for me.” Anon (9 years)

“It was gentle exercise that has a beneficial effect on my joints. Having had both hips replaced, it has helped my balance and improved my flexibility and general health. I have always felt better physically after a class.” Peter C. (7 years)

“At the end of the session, I feel very relaxed. I feel that it has helped my balance (I have osteoporosis) and eases some of my joint pains”. Kathleen W. (4 months)

“I always feel better when I’ve done it and I actively enjoy doing it. I have never had to force myself to come (unlike some other exercise!) My body and mind feel refreshed and energised. I feel that all parts of my body are exercised in a positive way. Rachel P.” (21 years)

“I found the exercises manageable and interesting. I used it as physiotherapy following a broken shoulder, knee replacement and broken foot.” Joan W. (30 years)

“I have ear problems, occasionally hip pain – two artificial titanium hip joints – I have arthritis too, especially hands and wrist. (Tai Chi is) a great way to keep fit. I do some of the exercises each day.” Shirley L. (8 years)

“I like the whole session with its combination of balance and strengthening exercises and meditation...and a bit of brain-work too! It doesn't feel too hard at the time but I can certainly feel the difference if I miss a week or two.” Cherie D. (8 years).

“Continued recovery. It had been recommended as a follow up to post heart attack exercises. I'm 85. My actuarial date of death (grandparents, 2 parents and one sister) is 63. I believe Tai Chi is part of my survival.” Clive L. (17 years)

“Even my oncologist encourages me to do Tai Chi.” Anon (1 year)

“Being told by a physiotherapist it would be good for my ruptured biceps tendon.” Anon (18 months)

“I find it's helping me with my balance and memory.” Joyce T. (4 months)

“I do it to keep improving; to keep mobile.” Hilary A. (16 years)

“Health benefits – after several operations and medical conditions, I always reap the rewards from Tai Chi.” Joan K. (15 years)

“I think my co-ordination and balance would have been much worse without Tai Chi. Well, I don't think, I know. Tai chi has helped me more than anything else in my life. I am 86.” Anon (17 years)

“Health benefits in particular. Several years ago, I had surgery for cancer followed by weeks of radiotherapy. I attended the classes whilst this was going on and was able to do some chair-based activities or else rest when needed, so didn't feel I wasn't able to participate.” (Anon 18 years)

These responses do not surprise us. Many of our students have told us that they first came along at the recommendation of their doctor, hospital consultant or therapist. Some had undergone hip or knee replacement surgery and they have found Tai Chi helpful in regaining and maintaining their mobility.

One of our students, a lady in her seventies, having suffered from Rheumatoid Arthritis for many years, recovered her mobility to the point where she was able to qualify as a teacher and work with a local hospital in setting up a class for fellow sufferers. She continued to run this class, and others, successfully for many years and, in recognition of this, she received a national award in 2014.

Tai Chi is recommended by health professionals worldwide for its health benefits. Various organisations, such as the Arthritis Society and the Osteoporosis Society in the UK, recommend it on their websites. Studies all over the world have shown that it improves balance and coordination, and so helps to reduce the risk of falling. It may also help in the prevention, or at least relief of, symptoms of a wide range of medical conditions, from heart failure to Parkinson's disease. The Harvard Medical School in the USA has not only published lots of these findings and written books about them but they have been so impressed that they now offer Tai Chi courses in order to encourage people to do it.

So why might Tai Chi be so good for your health? The benefits of most types of exercise are well known and undisputed, but why might Tai Chi be any better for you than, say, going along to an aerobics class, lifting weights or taking a daily walk around the block or swimming a few lengths of your local pool?

We're not saying you shouldn't do any, or all, of those things, of course. In fact, we recommend you do a bit of strength training and walking or swimming and maintain an active lifestyle generally as well as doing Tai Chi. However, Tai Chi has a lot of things going for it that you might not find elsewhere. Let's see what our students think about that.

Gentle exercise

Again and again, our students emphasised that Tai Chi is a *gentle* form of exercise

"Really enjoyed the class and found it very relaxing. The gentle movements improve my wellbeing and my posture feels quite centred afterwards." Chris M. (3 years).

"I enjoy the exercise element and the fact that I am moving without exerting myself too much. We are encouraged to do only what our bodies can cope with so there is no pressure. It also helps my concentration because I have to remember each movement in a particular order. I enjoyed the fact that every movement has a special name and each one was done slowly so it could be done more precisely. Also it helps your concentration because you can focus fully on what you are doing without it being rushed. Some other forms of exercise are too fast and I don't feel I do the movements properly, e.g. Zumba." Christine H. (6 months)

"I watched the class doing a sequence and it uplifted and inspired me and I wanted to do it and learn it. I also can remember feeling (and I think it was from my first lesson) very peaceful and relaxed doing qigong exercises, and afterwards I can remember, after class on a Saturday afternoon, walking away from class and feeling on top of the world! I think the more gentle and slower pace of exercises suited me." Kath P. (20 years)

“I enjoyed the type of movement and the flow of the lesson, and the relaxing quality. It is a form of movement that I can do which is gentle and low-impact. I also like that it is a type of martial art. I used to do Aikido when I was younger. I like the meditative nature.” Maggie R. (18 months)

Mental health and well-being

The health benefits reported were not only physical. How might Tai Chi contribute to mental health and well-being? Some clues may be found in looking at the students' responses. The first thing we can notice is that a majority told us that they found it helped them to relax and unwind.

Relaxation

“I had been suffering from health issues which led to anxiety and I wanted to overcome this. I find the class very relaxing, even though some weeks I feel like I'm going three steps backwards. However, I also know that other weeks I'm edging forwards and some weeks it all seems to make sense. So I persevere. I also feel calmer in myself and my anxiety has dropped. I don't think it's all to do with Tai Chi but it has definitely helped.” Anonymous. (1 year)

“It helped balance, calmness and confidence. So different from the rest of life. Ideas from Tai Chi help with everyday life.” Anonymous. (1 year).

“I appreciate the holistic nature of it. I find it is a very mindful practice. I know it does me good, it helps my balance, my concentration and my general well-being.” Viv A. (21 years)

“It is a very 'centring' practice. I always feel 'better' when I have spent 15 minutes or more doing Tai Chi. I love it! Accessing my chi! An excellent de-stresser. It was very useful when I was working with people who sometimes showed challenging behaviours. Helped me keep calm and grounded.” Marilyn C. (20 years)

“The ability it has to bring peace. To enable you to switch off from any thoughts in the outside world and to be present with what you are doing in the moment. Creating a calming flow that helps your breathing, posture and mind. Elegantly flowing in Tai Chi at your own pace and rhythm. Not thinking, just 'being'.” B. C. (3 weeks)

“I found it fascinating and stimulating. It encourages the mind to work and the body to de-stress. The fact that the more you learn, the more interesting and beneficial each session becomes. That feeling of strength yet relaxation that builds as the movements become more natural.” Elizabeth A. (1 year)

“It makes me feel relaxed. My back hurts less. Learning self-defence, which can come in handy.” E. M. (10 years)

“The gentleness and gracefulness of it. Mindfulness and relaxation.” Audrey W. (10 years)

“Feeling more relaxed and keeping mobile and having better balance, sleeping better and making friends.” Janet L. (5 years)

“The friendliness of the people and the relaxing feeling after practicing Tai Chi. It helps to keep me moving, I enjoy the meditation too. It’s so peaceful.” Hilary H. (2.5 years)

Friendship and good company

What came through very strongly in the feedback from our students was how important the social aspects of the class are to them.

“I enjoyed the class. It helped me to relax and I enjoyed the friendship of everyone.” Janet W. (2 years)

“I now enjoy the exercises and the good company” Anon (18 months)

“I enjoyed the company. Strange but you never find unpleasant people coming. Odd. Never thought about it before. The people have changed – but the ones who do come are the same type. I still enjoy the classes. People concentrate on their own movements. No one notices if you go wrong. Just wish I had joined earlier. Thank you Colin.” Anon (17 years)

“Nice to meet new people and encourage them. Seeing regular friends.” Audrey W. (10 years)

“Enjoyment and meeting other people.” Joyce T. (4 months)

“Making new friends. Great atmosphere within the group. Have felt better health wise since coming. Non-threatening.” Anon (21 months)

“Meeting up with the other members of the class is important too. We all started on the same footing learning a new form to us. So we were able to learn the subtle nuances within the form in great detail.” Barbara C. (18 years)

“I really enjoy the moves and the social side with old and new friends. The feel-good factor after doing a class.” Joan K. (15 years)

“I came originally for the health benefits/exercise. I suggested we met afterwards for coffee. I think it has helped us to become a closer more supportive group at Tai Chi. I continue to come because I love it.” Joan J. (25 years)

Challenge and stretching the mind

When asked what had caused them to keep coming back to classes, at least half said that they thrived on the challenge.

“The challenge, being a relatively slow learner.” Brenda G. (13 years)

“I find Tai Chi difficult and like a challenge.” Maryon R (8 months)

“The challenge of learning the routines. Meeting friends. Improving mobility and balance. I really enjoy the sword forms and still find Tai Chi interesting and challenging.” Joan W. 30 years)

“Overall, I love it! I love practicing at home, the feeling it gives you and how good you feel after. I love Saturday class, seeing friends and learning and improving under direction of teachers and fellow pupils. I have always liked the fact that it is a journey that never ends and you can keep learning and improving, I enjoy the challenge of that. I like the feeling of well-being I get from it. It has been a great help to me from a health point of view and has helped me at times of stress and personal challenges in my life.” Kath P. (20 years)

“Getting the movements as precise as I would like it to be is a challenge, but I know that will only come with lots of practice.” Elizabeth A. (1 year)

“I came back the next week out of curiosity and giving it more time to see if I could master it eventually. It was a challenge!” Gloria S. (7 years)

“Determined to learn more.” Jo K-D (6 weeks)

“I really enjoyed the challenge of learning new moves and coordination of body and mind. The exercises were really useful. The class is well organised, there is always a challenge, and the exercises and forms are beneficial to health and wellbeing. The relaxation technique is good to practice.” Cath P. (8 years)

“Yes, it is challenging and that’s good.” Anon (9 years)

“It keeps the brain stimulated while the body gets gentle exercise.” Joan J (25 years)

“I found the prospect of learning a new exercise regime more exciting than daunting. I thoroughly enjoyed learning the new movement techniques. I enjoy all

the different challenges presented to the group, eg new sequences, different forms, meditation, which I feel stimulate my physical and mental well-being and are particularly beneficial to older age groups.” Andrea W. (14 years)

“Anything new is challenging, but we have to keep trying!” Anon (6 years)

“I was lucky I did not find it scary, more challenging, especially when I realised how much I had to learn. It will always have its challenges. To combine all the elements of Tai Chi and move on to the next level/chapter, that is what makes the journey so special as each journey will be yours and yours alone.” David H. (8 years)

“Learning the forms and achieving results. Good to challenge yourself. Great for the brain.” Audrey W. (10 years)

“The new challenge of movement is so unlike typical western styles, which I have been used to in keep fit and dance. Concentrating on the movements and breathing results in me blocking out all everyday thoughts/worries.” Elaine (16 years)

“I love the slow exercise without it being strenuous or aerobic. Also it is good for the mind and memory.” Pat C. (7 years)

“Learning the background to Tai Chi and one or two moves for self-protection! Learning new routines, (which is) challenging, but also getting satisfaction from achievements!” Joan K. (15 years)

This challenge may be one of the reasons why Tai Chi seems to benefit the brain. A large study in China, as reported in the Journal of Alzheimer’s Disease, found that, over a two year period, the brains of sedentary people tended to shrink, while those of people doing various types of exercise stayed about the same. For those who practiced Tai Chi, however, their brains actually grew, so it’s unsurprising, perhaps, that it is recommended by the Alzheimer’s Disease Society.

There does tend to be a lot to get your head round when you are learning Tai Chi: the movements, the sequences, the principles, the fighting applications (if you are interested in those). It is a rich and varied discipline, and you can study it for a lifetime without ever getting to the bottom of it, but we make no apologies for that. It is this very richness which stimulates the mind and means that it never gets boring, as there is always more to learn. At the same, each new insight is so satisfying that you don’t have to rush to try to learn it all; you can simply relax and enjoy the journey. For some, although Tai Chi is a martial art and has no connection with religion, it can be a spiritually uplifting experience as well as providing many other benefits, including self-defence skills. It may seem a bit of a paradox that a martial

art, designed for self-protection, can also be “spiritually uplifting”. Here’s what our students had to say about that.

‘Spiritual’ benefits

“I have enjoyed, and been interested in, the spiritual aspects of it and valued it as it is so much more than just exercise. It set me on a path of reading religious and ‘spiritual’ books and also of meditation. Meditation has helped me in many ways as well.” Kath P. (20 years)

“I mainly do it for health reasons (though I am) always interested in the meditative aspect combined with physical movement/exercise. Also enjoy sword form for being more dynamic. Learning martial aspects can be fun.” Paul F. (20 years)

“The deep inner spiritual connection with the universe. Self-defence is great in these dangerous times! Tai Chi makes me healthy and mindful.” Gloria S. (7 years)

“I like being active and think it’s particularly good to ‘put your mind into your body’. I like learning new forms and enjoy the attention to detail. I think it’s good for balance, coordination, posture, memory and for relaxation and developing fluid movement. I find the martial applications both the most interesting and the most testing and challenging. What interests me most is how it blends martial arts with aspects of qigong/meditation. Also I’m intrigued by the ‘internal martial arts’ as opposed to those that rely on muscular tension and external power.” Richard A. (15 months)

“Most of all the peace and stillness it gives me inside.” David H. (8 years)

“A sense of joined–up-ness between body and mind. Being in touch with my body more in a mind/body sense. I often feel great after a class. Sometimes I also feel a kind of flow as though I am floating on air currents during the class.” Mandy S. (2 years)

Tai Chi has also provided some comfort and strength for those of our students who have lost someone dear to them.

“I started your classes because I had my life turned upside down in 2016. I lost my husband to cancer. We had been married for fifty years. I didn’t know much about Tai Chi at first. It is fascinating. Calming. It makes me feel so much better, well, calm and relaxed so I can cope much better.” Sally H. (4 years)
“I needed occupational therapy for grief following the death of my wife. I enjoyed exercise which kept me agile in older age in both body and mind” Malcolm L. (11 years)

Part 2 - How to Get Started

What goes on in a Tai Chi class?

Each class might last for one to two hours and start with some kind of very gentle warm-up routine, which would include some loosening and stretching exercises. These would often include some qigong exercises, which again provide gentle loosening and stretching but with the additional purpose of improving the circulation of 'chi' in the body. 'Chi' is a Chinese word meaning 'life force' or 'energy' and 'qigong' means 'energy work'.

Like Tai Chi itself, a full qigong session provides a whole-body work-out while also being very calming and relaxing. Both are normally all done standing up, or sitting down if necessary, and there is no getting down on the floor, which can be good news for anyone suffering from arthritis or any conditions that prevent them from taking part in other activities such as Yoga or Pilates. The gentle movements are coordinated with the breath and the energy is centred in the lower abdomen, at a point called the 'dantien'.

Once the class has warmed up, they spend time learning a Tai Chi sequence or form. Sometimes the word 'form' is given to each of the individual moves within the sequence, though most people in the West refer to the whole sequence as 'the form'. The 24-step form might therefore be referred to as the sequence with 24 forms. Whatever we call it, there are 24 different moves in the Beijing simplified 24-step sequence and it is practiced all over the world.

There are various different sequences within each style of Tai Chi. The styles have developed over centuries of being passed down through schools and families, and they have slightly different characteristics.

How to choose a style

Some styles are more physically demanding than others. You can get a feel for what they are like from looking online at YouTube videos.

You will see that Chen style is a complex, dynamic style with some very challenging movements that require a high level of fitness, while Yang style, which derived from it, tends to be less extreme and easier to master. In some styles, such as Wu style, the body leans forwards while in the other styles the back normally remains vertical. In Hao style, the movements tend to be very small, compact and understated but this appearance is quite deceptive as there is a lot of energy work going on internally, as with any type of Tai Chi.

One of the easiest, and most popular, styles to learn is Cheng Man Ching style, based on the teachings of Professor Ching Man Ching, who simplified the Yang Style Long form, making it more suitable for Western students to master. The Cheng Man Ching form has 37 postures, while the Yang Style Long Form has 108, though many Yang style teachers now offer much shorter forms that are easier to learn, as do most of the other styles, including Chen style. The modern simplified 24-step form is shorter still and is also very suitable for beginners and for people past retirement age.

By watching a wide selection of such videos, you can get an impression of how each style might suit your own needs and capabilities. Don't worry about how complicated the sequences look; that's what your teacher is there for. You normally only learn one movement at a time so that the sequence builds up gradually over weeks and months of practice.

Most of the students who found their first lesson a bit daunting at first said that it was because of the length and complexity of the sequences. Ironically, remembering the sequence is the least important aspect of Tai Chi. The quality of each movement is where you will find the secrets and the benefits. By 'secrets' we don't mean mysterious things that will be held back, it's just that some aspects of Tai Chi will only reveal themselves to you when you have practiced a movement many times and have begun to experience and understand certain qualities for yourself.

There is no competitiveness in Tai Chi. You don't need to keep trying to 'catch up' with anyone else. Each person is on their own unique journey and yet everyone tends to help each other along. Classes are normally organised so that every student is enabled to make some progress at their own speed.

How is this possible? In some classes it is done by splitting the class into groups so that everyone gets help from the teacher or an assistant teacher. In other classes, where no assistant teachers are available, the instructor will probably take the whole class through just one movement so that everyone is working on the same thing but at different levels of understanding. Learning Tai Chi has both length and depth, so just because you are going over the same movement again and again, that doesn't mean you are not progressing. Practice makes perfect, and in China, that patient practice is called Gongfu (or Kung Fu).

"We all seemed to be in the same boat. It's good to have a routine to follow and nice to have the same people to meet up with. There is no winning or losing." Anon (9 years)

"I just enjoy the exercise and the fact that it is not competitive, but actually makes me concentrate and think about what I am doing." Lesley A. (20 years)

“I thought everything about it was just right for me and realized nobody worried if you didn’t get things just right.” Pat C. (7 years)

“I have found satisfaction in completing the sequences and being able to practice them on my own at home: the feeling of well-being this creates and the social aspects of working within our group.” Andrea W. (14 years)

“Friendly participants and relaxed but serious tuition. No one is pressured but there is a genuine will to improve.” Meryl A. (4 months)

Where to find a class

You may find classes in local community centres, health clubs and private training halls. They may be advertised in local newspapers, online or via community groups such as support groups for older people. A search engine like Google will probably list several schools in your area, since Tai Chi is popular in most parts of the world. You might also find it helpful to check out the list of instructors on the website of The Tai Chi and Qigong Union for Great Britain,

What can be a bit challenging to start with?

Our students cast their minds back to when they first started so that they could share with you anything that they found a bit daunting when they came along to their first class. They did this, not to try to put you off but to let you know that we have all been there so you can see that it’s just a natural response that quickly passes if you are prepared for it and give yourself a little time to settle in.

Here’s what they said:

“Learning all the moves seemed daunting at first”. Paul F. (20 years)

“Wondering if I was going to enjoy it, or even do it!” Anon (1 year)

“Completely different concept from what I expected or anything I had previously participated in.” Jane M. (25 years)

“The amount that had to be learnt. How everyone else was so far ahead.” Anon (1 year)

“It was very difficult co-ordinating feet and hands. Sometimes it can take a while to get it right.” Brenda G, (13 years)

“The main “scary” thing for me is not “getting it”. Being unable to get the elements of a step and feeling that I might look stupid.” Paul W. (3 months)

“I was worried I might not pick up the movements quickly. I thought the movements might be too difficult as I have osteoarthritis. New moves can be challenging at first, but I can usually manage most of them after several practice sessions.” Christine H. (6 months)

“I was afraid of not being able to do it right and of looking foolish; not being able to co-ordinate arms and legs and left and right to make the moves; being slow to remember the routine.” Anon (9 years)

“The fact that others in the group had been doing it for a while and I was a total novice, with no knowledge of Tai Chi.” Kathleen W. (4 months)

“Meeting new people, getting the movements wrong. Not picking up the sequences as well as others in the group. Doing the sequence in the correct order (as a complete beginner)” B. C. (3 weeks)

“I didn’t know what to expect. “Would I make a fool of myself?” Anon. (1 year)

“Fear of aggravating my injuries, aches and pains.” Maggie R. (18 months)

“The fact that I couldn’t remember any of the moves! Also, that others seemed to get it before I did as they had better memory recall. Remembering forms...takes me longer than most! However, once I can perform the moves correctly, I can retain the knowledge.” Gloria S. (7 years)

“Learning something I had no previous knowledge or understanding of. I didn’t understand the movements and had no confidence whatsoever that I could learn them. Having to move around and occupy space instead of standing still in one place.” Angela L. (8 years)

“Amount of moves to remember.” Joyce T. (4 months)

“Nothing scary but a fear of looking foolish or falling asleep during meditation.” Patrick G. (18 months)

“There is great satisfaction on learning to do the moves properly (even if I forget later). It is taking my brain longer to absorb all the moves and learn the ending. I need lots of repetition.” Joan J. (25 years)

“I was a little apprehensive since I was joining a class which had been going for a while.” Meryl A. (4 months)

“The Thursday class was very crowded. I was just learning (the) Cheng Man Ching (sequence) and felt as if everyone else knew what they were doing. I transferred to

the Tuesday session which was quite small (starting up) and felt more at ease.”
Joan J. (25 years)

You will probably have noticed that there were some common themes here.

The number and complexity of the movements - and wondering if they would be able to remember them - was a common worry, though, as you will see, that really isn't something you need to worry about. You can just take your time to enjoy each movement for its own sake and explore it in depth.

Over time, understanding and experiencing fully just a few movements can be more profitable than hurrying to keep up and learn lots of long sequences superficially.

Tai Chi is not a race, and it doesn't matter how long your own journey takes, so there's nothing to be gained by comparing yourself with anyone else, yet a fear of looking foolish came up time and again.

It's normal for people to feel apprehensive when trying out something new with a group of strangers. Fortunately, Tai Chi students tend to be a friendly bunch, so experienced students tend to take newcomers under their wing. In a new class, where everyone starts together, you may be reassured by the feeling that there is 'safety in numbers' and you are 'all in the same boat.' Either way, you may find that you quickly make friends, and this helps to overcome any anxiety about what other people might think of you.

Tai Chi is not a performance art, it is a personal experience, so it really doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. Here's how the type of class you join can affect our first experience.

Classes new and old

Classes vary, depending on the length of time they have been running. Finding one where everyone is starting together, and working at the same level, can be quite unusual. Even if you do find such a class, there may be new people joining the group from time to time. Of those who began together, some are sure to pick it up more quickly than others.

When a class has been going for a few years, there will be a vast range of different levels of experience among participants, from brand new starters to a few who have been there so long that they know several sequences and may even be training to become teachers. Sometimes, the more advanced students can assist the teacher by helping those with less experience.

“A small part of me was apprehensive because I didn’t know anyone and didn’t really know what I was letting myself in for but that soon disappeared because people were friendly and encouraging, I was given time one to one with another student to get me going, and the activity itself was enjoyable and appealed to me. I think it’s best anyway to approach new things with an open mind and not waste energy worrying how you are perceived. Also, the people are nice and I always felt encouraged by the other students and instructors, even when plainly out of my depth!” Richard A (15 months)

In established classes, it is quite normal for the class to warm up together and then split into groups, enabling them to work on different things. The instructor may go from group to group and then leave some people to practice on their own or with a senior student or assistant instructor to help them. Sometimes a group becomes a “self-help” group in which everyone helps each other if they get ‘stuck’ remembering the form.

In this way, people get to know each other and make friends, unlike in many other exercise classes in which a person can arrive not knowing anyone, copy the movements of the teacher, normally accompanied by very loud music, for an hour, and then go out still not knowing anyone. In a Tai Chi class, it is very unusual to leave your first class without having made at least one new friend.

After qualifying, instructors may still come along to classes for their own development and because they love it. In one of our long-established classes, so many people had qualified as teachers that we often found ourselves with more instructors than students. That had the advantage that new starters were able to enjoy the benefits of individual tuition or working in a small group with others at their own level of experience.

This kind of arrangement can help people to settle in quickly. When asked what they found scary or daunting, lots of our students simply wrote “nothing”.

“I didn’t find anything daunting or scary but took to it from the start. I immediately thought ‘I like this discipline’. It suited me as I used to belong to a keep fit team when I was younger and enjoyed that too. It’s a lovely friendly group with a good teacher and we have a laugh now and again. Total enjoyment!” Jean T. (18 years)

“Nothing, because we joined as a group of five. We came because one of our group wanted to join and didn’t want to come alone.” Cath P. (8 years)

“I rang Colin...to reassure myself that the class was suitable for my ability level, so was not daunted by my first class there.” Valerie T. (8 years)

“We were all beginners so that was fine. I only joined because it was something different.” Anon (17 years)

“Nothing (was scary) but all of it (was challenging) at first.” Maureen W. (8 years)

“Not scary or daunting but did wonder if I would ever be able to pick the routines up. I still think I should be able to do the routines after all this time without copying Colin but find a lot of the other members are in the same position.” Pat C. (7 years)

Why our students decided to stick with it

For many of those who did decide to come back after that first lesson, it gradually became a way of life. What was it that has kept them coming back for weeks, months or years? Here’s what they said:

“Determination. I liked the time doing whole class movement. I liked the meditation. It helped balance/calmness /confidence. It was so different from rest of life. Ideas from Tai Chi help with everyday life. I still find some things challenging but that is OK. All life is a challenge.” Anon (1 year)

“The experience and the feel-good factor motivate me not to miss a class if at all possible. Remembering the movements and steps and the amazing feeling if I can complete a routine fully” Livette S. (7 years)

“My mobility and balance were both quite bad when I first joined a Tai Chi class. I was unable to do many of the moves that required a degree of balance, such as toe kicks etc. I would watch the other members of the class and feel useless at first but gradually gained confidence. I was determined to gain a better sense of balance, and to get better, especially as many of the members were older than me and all had various health issues of their own, but they found that Tai Chi helped them. This inspired me to persevere. I have gradually gained much more confidence and better balance and mobility and enjoy the challenges and the company of the other members and the instructor. I still have many challenges with my mobility and balance, but it is slowly improving.” Jan L. (1 year)

“The health benefits are important to me as my overall balance has improved, and I feel my core strength and leg muscles, in particular, benefit from Tai Chi. I like the calmness I feel during and after each session, and I find it helps me to relax more once I am back at home. I also like meeting the others in the class.” Christine H. (6 months)

“The people in the group were very friendly and it didn’t seem to matter that I had no experience. The leader is very patient.” Kathleen W. (4 months)

“How lovely the teacher/people were and how beautifully they demonstrated the Tai Chi sequences, and a desire to learn it.” B. C. (3 weeks)

“The flow of movements in harmony, one step merging into the next in continuous action - which is restful, relaxed and dynamic - plus the health benefits of balance, posture and confidence; friendship, good company and enjoyment of the feeling of doing Tai Chi reasonably well.” Paul W. (3 months)

“Tai Chi has fascinated me for many years, long before finally joining a class. I tried to learn at home as I wanted to utilise the health and general wellbeing elements. I have tried sword forms and find the self-protection elements fascinating.” Jan W. (1 year)

“The class had an authentic feel about it. I like that Tai Chi helps me relax and keep balanced in many ways.” Paul F. (20 years)

“I enjoy it, and I get a real kick out of realizing I've completed and learnt a set of movements that I had not been able to do a couple of weeks before. For new people – we've all been there, we've all felt clumsy, waving our arms around when everybody else knows what to do (or so it seems!) Just stick with it. For me, it has been more than worth it and I'm just sorry that I didn't do it for so many years.” Glenys B. (10 years – with a 15 year gap)

Finding the right teacher

Just as there are many types of class, there are many different approaches to teaching, even within the same school. Even as a married couple, we have our own ways of teaching different classes, and we find that our students tend to gravitate towards the one who best meets their own particular needs. Those who love to be led through their forms every time, always accompanied by verbal instructions (even of the teacher ends up with laryngitis!), tend to go to one of us, while those who want feedback and don't mind being watched and helped to correct what they are doing, tend to go to the other. On the rare occasions where one of us may have to cover a class for the other, students can find this difference quite challenging.

Several people said that the approach of the teacher was a factor in their decision to stay with the class.

“I found the guy who took the lessons gave the class confidence, starting with easy movements of posture and limbs, also breathing and relaxation.” Anon (1 year)

“I liked my teacher, Mark. He was very thorough and patient. I felt that his observations were very astute. He made me feel safe and I trusted his judgement.”
Gloria S. (7 years)

“The form, to a total beginner, looks so complicated but Colin was so patient and encouraging that by the end of the first session I knew I was hooked.” Elizabeth A. (1 year)

“I loved doing it and Colin is a very interesting and amusing teacher.” Brenda G. (13 years)

“Enjoyed the fact that the class wasn’t too large, and the people were friendly and the teacher encouraging. I’m progressing slowly and enjoying having a challenge!”
Brenda M. (2 years)

“Very patient teachers. Learning in a small group in the first few months – helping each other. My balance improved quite quickly so I could see the benefits. The more you learn and the better you get, the more you get out of it. Didn’t want to be defeated.” Angela L. (8 years)

“The tutor was relaxed and kind and humorous and clear to follow. He just suits the needs of this class and never loses patience with us.” Anon (9 years)

“At the time, I was suffering with anxiety and the thought of joining a class was daunting! However, the instructor was very calming and put everyone at ease and whilst the simple moves were hard to accomplish, the instructor encouraged us and took it slowly so that I found the experience calming. Whilst I had found the first lesson confusing, in that my arms and legs wouldn’t move like my head wanted them to, I found it a challenge and quite calming at the same time, and I love a challenge. Whilst my head knows the moves, my body/arms/legs still have a mind of their own and work against me!! But I’m going to persevere.” Anon (1 year)

Which says it all really! As teachers, we feel very privileged to share our own Tai Chi journey with such amazing people and we are thankful for all the detailed and illuminating feedback they have given us and allowed us to share with you.

We hope you have enjoyed sharing the thoughts of the sixty-five students who took part in our survey, a small but representative sample of the thousands who have enjoyed the journey with us over the past three decades and perhaps also representative of the millions who practice the art worldwide.

Whatever inspired your curiosity about Tai Chi, we hope you have found something in their words that resonates with you and stimulates a deeper interest that will allow you embark on your own exploration of this rich and fascinating discipline.

Perhaps you can find comfort in the knowledge that others have walked this path before you and will welcome you to join them. Remember that there is no rush. Just relax and enjoy the journey, one step at a time.

Where to go from here

Further information about Tai Chi can be found in our free guides:

Your Tai Chi Companion Part 1: Getting Started

[your tai chi companion part 1- getting started.pdf \(taichileeds.com\)](http://www.taichileeds.com/uploads/1/0/9/5/10953462/your_tai_chi_companion_part_1-getting_started.pdf)

and

Your Tai Chi Companion Part 2: Moving On

[https://www.taichileeds.com/uploads/1/0/9/5/10953462/your tai chi companion part 2 - moving on.pdf](https://www.taichileeds.com/uploads/1/0/9/5/10953462/your_tai_chi_companion_part_2_-_moving_on.pdf)

A list of registered instructors in your area can be found on the website of the Tai Chi and Qigong Union for Great Britain:

[Find a Tai Chi Instructor \(taichiunion.com\)](http://www.taichiunion.com)

