

World Tai Chi and Qigong Day

A TIME OF CELEBRATION AND LEARNING

by Wesley Adams



World Tai Chi and Qigong Day is Saturday, April 24. This annual event started in Kansas City, MO, in the late 1990s and has since spread to locations around the world. Last year, participants in hundreds of cities across 65 countries celebrated this day dedicated to educating the world about Tai Chi and Qigong, and the health benefits these healing arts offer to help maintain a healthy balance in all aspects of life.

While co-founders Bill Douglas and Angela Wong-Douglas had the desire and vision to encourage people worldwide to embrace this healing art form, it has been my experience that people, in general, are hesitant to embrace anything that seems foreign to them. To help those who only need a little “encouragement” to try something new, here are answers to some of the most frequently asked questions about Tai Chi.

Q: *What is Tai Chi and where did it come from?*

A: Tai Chi is a form of physical movement that originated in ancient China and was developed primarily as a martial or “fighting” art used to protect families or clans. The art was a closely guarded family secret, and the five main styles—Chen, Yang, Wu, Sun and Woo (also spelled Hao)—are named for the families believed to have created them. Although each style has unique characteristics, their underlying principles are essentially the same. In modern China, Tai Chi is considered a traditional Chinese sport (among other Chinese martial arts that are collectively referred to as “Wu Shu”), in the same way each of the martial arts are considered a sport in the United States. Tai Chi’s popularity with the American public has grown primarily due to the many health benefits associated with its practice. Tai Chi, which emphasizes balance, breathing, coordination and conditioning, rather than muscular strength, is recognized worldwide because of the fluidity associated with its movements.

Q: *What health benefits are associated with practicing Tai Chi?*

A: A growing body of scientific studies on the health benefits of Tai Chi and Qigong support health theories long held by traditional Chinese medicine and centuries of practical application. Recent major studies funded by the National

Institutes of Health have demonstrated the effectiveness of Tai Chi to improve balance, coordination and strength, and to reduce frailty and falls in older persons. Other studies have shown a link between Tai Chi and improved cardiovascular health, flexibility, physical work capacity and bone density, as well as stress reduction and alleviation of symptoms of chronic illnesses. Traditional Chinese medicine also holds that regular practice can stimulate the mind, improve concentration, focus and coordination; stimulate the circulation of blood; improve the function of internal organs; enhance the functioning of the central nervous system; and promote a general sense of well-being.

Q: *How is Tai Chi different from Qigong?*

A: Tai Chi and Qigong have more similarities than differences. Although Tai Chi forms are more intricate than Qigong forms, the major difference between the two is that movements in Tai Chi also have martial applications. This means the movements that create stability, strengthen bones and encourage flexibility in muscles, joints, tendons and ligaments can also be used for self-defense, while the movements in Qigong are designed to promote robust health and are not used in a martial way.

Q: *Why do they sometimes refer to Tai Chi practice as “playing” Tai Chi?*

A: Experienced Tai Chi practitioners are said to be like accomplished musicians who bring the full range of their bodies into “play” as effortlessly as musical instruments come alive in the hands of a master musician.

Q: *Is Tai Chi easy?*

A: If you ask beginning students, they will most likely say that Tai Chi is not easy. Tai Chi practice requires students to think differently (quiet the mind) in coordination with the body (remember a series of movements) and retrain major muscle groups (which must adapt over time to each new posture). While the movements are not strenuous, they can be challenging. To “play” Tai Chi well takes consistent practice.

Q: *Can you be too old or too young to learn Tai Chi?*

A: Tai Chi has few age limits. Men and women, boys and girls of nearly all ages can practice Tai Chi. However, sometimes separate classes may be offered for the very young. Practice requires focus and deep concentration. It is, therefore, not appropriate to have anyone in class who may cause distractions.

Q: *What equipment is needed to practice Tai Chi?*

A: Once learned, Tai Chi can be practiced almost anywhere at any time without the need for anything more than a small, open space and loose comfortable clothing. The beginning student may be asked to wear a uniform of some type while receiving instruction during class. This is to ensure the instructor can fully observe the student's posture that may otherwise be obscured by inappropriate (overly baggy or layered) clothing.

Q: *Why are there different ways of spelling Tai Chi and Qigong terms?*

A: I'm often asked which is right: "Taiji" or "Tai Chi," "Qigong" or "Chi Kung," "Chi" or "Qi"? The answer is all are correct. While they are basically pronounced the same, many people are confused by the differences in spelling. In the simplest terms, spelling differences are due to two major periods in history when attempts were made to phonetically reproduce the Chinese language in an effort to help foreign speakers who were unable to read Chinese characters.

Q: *What does "Sifu" mean?*

A: Sifu (pronounced see-foo) is generally translated as "teacher" and is considered a respectful form of address. While there are many kinds of teachers and certifications, a traditional-lineage Tai Chi instructor is addressed as Sifu, and is only addressed this way by his or her students. To provide a little perspective, Japanese forms of martial arts address a teacher as "Sensei," and those coming from Sanskrit training use the term "Guru."

Q: *Why Can't I Just Buy a DVD and learn Tai Chi?*

A: To get the most benefit from Tai Chi, you will need a teacher. Although there are hundreds of instructional DVDs on nearly every style of Tai Chi imaginable, there are some things they can't do. DVDs cannot provide feedback in real time or demonstrate techniques spatially. The health benefits and martial practices of Tai Chi require correct posture, technique and mental focus, which are extremely difficult to convey over a two-dimensional medium. DVDs should be considered a supplement to classroom instruction for beginning students.

Q: *What is Chi?*

A: Chi is the Chinese term for "life energy." Pronounced "chee," it is also spelled "Qi" and in Japanese it is called "Ki."

Q: *What is meant by structure?*

A: In Tai Chi, when teachers speak of structure, they're talking about posture. Just as a building has to have structure that is straight and solid, so do our bodies. One of the purposes of practicing Tai Chi is to build good posture; and once attained, to maintain it by continuing to practice.

Q: *What is the Dan Tien?*

A: The Dan Tien is a concept that has several different meanings. Most commonly, it refers to a location within the body two to three inches behind and below the belly button that is at, or very close to, the location of the body's center of gravity. This is important because in Tai Chi all movements originate from this location. The Dan Tien is also considered a center in the body where energy can be gathered, stored or depleted.

Q: *Why is the idea of yin and yang so hard for me to understand?*

A: There is a common misperception that yin and yang represent opposites (like good and bad, hard and soft, or day and night). The idea of opposition suggests conflict. A better way to think about this concept is to consider everything to be complementary, meaning interconnected and interdependent in such a way that they interact with each other to achieve a delicate balance, often only lasting an instant between that moment of balance and the next adjustment. Just as day slowly fades to night at dusk, morning ushers in daylight at dawn. Neither dusk nor dawn is fully light or dark; with both, there also exists some degree of interaction with the other in a complementary way. And don't confuse the word complimentary, which means "given free as a courtesy or favor" with complementary, which means "serving to complete, or providing what the other lacks."

Q: *What is "push" hands?*

A: In the simplest terms, push hands is a two-person martial or self-defense training technique to help students develop the coordination, sensitivity and reflexes to neutralize an opponent's force and/or position, stick with the opponent's attacking limb, or flow with an opponent's force, as a means to gain the advantage and mount a counterattack.

Q: *Is Tai Chi a religion?*

A: Tai Chi is not a religion, but historically, it has been affiliated with Taoist philosophy. Taoism was one of the major philosophies of the era when Tai Chi was believed to have been created, and many early practitioners were also monks. Because of its affiliation with Taoist thought, there is a meditative aspect to Tai Chi. However, the purpose of this form of moving meditation is to quiet the mind. Tai Chi should be compatible with any organized religion or philosophies promoting positive thinking.

Wesley Adams owns and operates Columbia Tai Chi Center, located at 2910 Rosewood Dr, in Columbia. For more info, contact Wes at (803) 873-2100 or visit ColumbiaTaiChiCenter.com.