



“Health Benefits of Taoist Tai Chi® Internal Arts and Methods”

by Dr. Bruce McFarlane, BA MD CCFP, FCFP
Medical adviser International Taoist Tai Chi Society

Notes from his keynote address at the Newsmakers' Luncheon,
organized by the National Press Club of Canada
Sheraton Hotel Ottawa, May 30, 2008

An active physical life plays a central role in maintaining good health:

1. Disease prevention and the modification of the impact of a given disease on a person's life:

- Cardiovascular disease: reduction in coronary artery disease and in the incidence of sudden death from malignant heart rhythms, lowering of blood pressure, improved cholesterol levels, lessening of the symptoms of heart failure. Like smoking 20 cigarettes a day, being sedentary doubles the risk of cardiovascular disease and is more dangerous than raised blood pressure and elevated blood fats combined.

- Osteoarthritis: a sustained exercise program results in improved strength, flexibility, position sense, pain control, endurance and independent functioning.

- Osteoporosis, falls and hip fractures: hip fractures are related to thin bone (30% of woman after menopause), poor balance and a fear of falling. Physical activity improves all three and reduces the risk of hip fracture by perhaps 50%. Given the 20% excess mortality associated with hip fracture, and the fact that a majority of people fails to return to prefracture level of functioning, fracture prevention is crucial.

- Obesity and diabetes: weight control helped by physical activity. Type 2 diabetes may be prevented by regular exercise; improved blood sugar control in those already diabetic.

- Reduced incidence of depression, low back pain, bowel cancer. Stress reduction; enhanced immunity.

- Improved cognition

2. Reduction in frailty/prolongation of independent living

- The typical sedentary person faces 10 years of partial dependency and a final year of total dependency. Someone active can expect to significantly delay loss of independence. Onset of disability postponed by 5 years in those at lowest risk (BMI <25, non smoker, regular physical activity)

compared to those at highest risk (BMI >27, smoker, non regular physical activity).

3. Provision of the sense of well being, vigour and health

And yet 2/3 of our adult population is not sufficiently active

- At special risk are men and women aged 45-65, woman >65, people with low income, those with chronic illness or disability
- Limited awareness of the benefits of active living
- Feeling of “I don't think I can; it's too late” because of lack of time or facilities, fear of injury, of worsening already existing problems or of social embarrassment, decreased sense of personal capacity.
- Cultural bias towards high tech investigations/treatments

How Taoist Tai Chi® internal arts and methods make the benefits of an active life available to all

1. An ancient art with a deep understanding of how the body works, of the connections between the various systems of the body and between the student and those around them. And an awareness of the possibility of change that long preceded the concept of neuroplasticity. This awareness speaks, for instance, to the increased tone and difficulty initiating movement seen in Parkinson's disease and post stroke.

2. An art readily adapted to people of all ages and health circumstances: young and old, the fit and the sedentary, those who are well and those dealing with deep illness. The demands on flexibility, balance, strength and endurance are adjusted to the student's current situation. And the exercise evolves with the student's ability to execute the movements.

For those who are young and without significant health problem, the exercise is immediately vigorous. There are head stands, forward, backward and side rolls, dramatic back and forward bends and a variety of other stretches that profoundly challenge the flexibility of the body. The set of 108 moves, done quickly and continuously with one-legged deep sitting and full upright rising motions, asks the body to work at high aerobic capacity.

For those who are older or suffer from the stiffness and weakness of illness, the teacher and student proceed with much greater care. There is no less radical change in the

circumstances of the body. There is still the same diligence required to effect significant gains. But the pace of change is slower, great respect is given to the difficulties the body is presently experiencing and the exercise is tailored to the realities of each person's condition. Sometimes, people simply need more time and patience to rebuild muscle strength and stretch out their joints. Other times, an advanced arthritic process may mean that the normal range of motion in the affected joint is no longer possible but remains quite achievable elsewhere in the body. Some may find themselves, as a consequence of a progressive neuromuscular illness like multiple sclerosis, exercising vigorously in a chair as they perform the sitting set.

The older or less well person will start by doing the set more slowly and will sit less deeply. Depending on the status of their heart and lungs, the exercise will be of moderate aerobic demand and the approximate equivalent of walking at a pace of 6 kilometers an hour.

Because of a unique form of stretching that involves simultaneous lengthening, turning and relaxation, all of the body's tissues are gradually exercised. Initial efforts to free up movement in the hip joints progress to increasing range of motion in the internal joints of the pelvis (the sacro-iliac joints) and in the multiple joints of the spine. The stretching gradually extends into the internal tissues of the body, engaging the respiratory diaphragm, the pelvic floor, and the ligaments and connective tissue that support the spine and abdominal organs.

The slow, deliberate nature of the movements is of benefit to all who practice this art, especially seniors, as it minimizes the risk of muscle tears and tendon injuries commonly associated with other forms of exercise.

3. The provision of an environment that is noncompetitive and in which people of varied ages and states of health practice together. The focus is always improved health, not perfect movement. This is hugely important as many adults coming to an exercise program are either self critical or ready to believe that they have lost the capacity to be physically active and enjoy and benefit from movement.

4. A complete exercise that, at the same time, builds strength (especially of the legs, spine and abdomen), flexibility (painless range of motion available to all the joints of the body, even the small joints of the hands and spine), balance and endurance.

There develops also a relaxation of both body and spirit. Only the muscles necessary for a given movement are used, enhancing the efficiency of movement, reducing fatigue, increasing the circulation of blood to the muscles, opening up joints and encouraging the circulation of nourishing synovial fluid. Gradually, one establishes a sense of

calm and focus. The movements become a moving meditation, the mind is given respite from an endless preoccupation with yesterday and tomorrow and one's style of living in the world changes.

The collegial club structure of the Society, doing the tai chi regularly with other members, the focus on teaching as a volunteer instructor and the emphasis on being of help to others in whatever ways present themselves all serve to create a state of calm, engagement and purpose. As you become involved with the situations of others, you find yourself with more perspective and contentment. Life feels more integrated, connected and balanced. There is the opportunity for dual cultivation – a cultivation of the mind and spirit as well as the body.

5. In the language of today, this art is green. No special equipment or facilities are required. Comfortable footwear, loose clothing and a bit of floor space are all that are needed. It is not costly. It lessens the need for physician services, reducing the demands on our beleaguered health care system. It is free of the side effects associated with medication and hospitalization. It is done both at home and with others, the social aspect making it more likely you will persist with your practice. It is pleasurable and asks the body to do what it is designed to do.

6. The art is supported by the Taoist Tai Chi Society, a not for profit, registered charity that has now 38 years of experience assisting people improve their health. It is the Society that has established worldwide common curricula, training methods and instructor accreditation. All instructors are unpaid; they teach to share the health benefits they have themselves experienced.

7. This tradition has a profound respect for the student. Its focus on the long term, on whole body function and on what we can do for ourselves provides a balance to the powerful, high tech interventions of western medicine – all of which are passively received. As you practice, you learn to value health and to reflect on what constitutes a healthy life. Our understanding of health and disease is deepened, as is our awareness of the means available to all of us, young and old, to improve our health. Problems often don't disappear but we find ourselves actively involved in finding solutions.