

What is Taiji Quan

The Chinese characters for Taiji Quan can be translated as the 'Supreme Ultimate Force' (the last character also means 'fist'). The notion of 'supreme' or 'grand ultimate' is often associated with the Chinese concept of yin-yang - the notion that one can see and understand the dynamic duality (male/female, active/passive, dark/light, forceful/yielding, etc.) in all things. 'Force' (or, more literally, 'fist') can be thought of here as the means or way of achieving this yin-yang, or 'supreme-ultimate' actions in your life.

Taiji, as it is practiced in the west today, can perhaps best be thought of as a moving form of meditation. There are a number of so-called forms (sometimes also called 'sets') which consist of a sequence of movements. Many of these movements are originally derived from the martial arts (and perhaps even more ancestrally than that, from the natural movements of animals and birds) although the way they are performed in Taiji is slowly, softly and gracefully, with smooth and even transitions between postures.

For many practitioners the focus in doing them is not, first and foremost, martial, but as a meditative exercise for the body. For others the combat aspects of Taiji are of considerable interest. In Chinese philosophy and medicine there exists the concept of 'Qi', a vital force that animates the body. One of the avowed aims of Taiji is to foster the circulation of this 'Qi' within the body, the belief being that by doing so the health and vitality of the person are enhanced. This 'Qi' circulates in meridians that are close related to the nervous and vascular system and thus the notion is closely connected with that of the practice of acupuncture and other oriental healing arts.

Another aim of Taiji is to foster a calm and tranquil mind, focused on the precise execution of these exercises. Learning to do them correctly provides a practical avenue for learning about such things as balance, alignment, fine-scale motor control, rhythm of movement, the genesis of movement from the body's vital center, and so on. Thus the practice of Taiji can in some measure contribute to being able to better stand, walk, move, run, etc. in other spheres of life as well. Many practitioners notice benefits in terms of correcting poor postural, alignment or movement patterns which can contribute to tension or injury. Furthermore the meditative nature of the exercises is calming and relaxing in and of itself.

Because the Taiji movements have their origins in the martial arts, practicing them does have some martial applications. In a two-person exercise called 'push-hands' Taiji principles are developed in terms of being sensitive to and responsive of another person's 'Qi' or vital energy. It is also an opportunity to employ some of the martial aspects of Taiji in a kind of slow-tempo combat. Long-time practitioners of Taiji who are so-inclined can become very adept at martial arts. The emphasis in Taiji is on being able to channel potentially destructive energy (in the form of a kick or a punch) away from one in a manner that will dissipate the energy or send it in a direction where it is no longer a danger to self.

There are many benefits to practicing taiji and that is why millions of people throughout the world practise it daily, not just for its effect on health, longevity, keep the practitioner peaceful and calm, but also its ability to reduce stress, body tension and balance the emotions. It can have a profound effect on the quality of life for the practitioner.