

By Scott Cole

moving slow in a fast world

The rise of tai chi in America.

In an era in which Americans are primarily concerned with losing weight and gaining muscle mass, it is no wonder that the slow-moving martial art of tai chi has been a bit of a hard sell.

Tai chi won't fold under your bed for easy storage, nor will it claim to reduce inches off your waistline in "just 3 minutes a day." The reality is, however, that those who practice tai chi are likely to get stronger, have less anxiety, move more organically and gracefully, improve their balance and enjoy more flexibility.

A 10-year research trial through Harvard, Emory and Yale universities compared tai chi with computerized balance training. The trial, which appeared in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (1996; 44 [5], 489-97), found that tai chi practitioners had overall better balance and reduced their risk of falling by 47.5%. A study published in the *Hawaii Medical Journal* (1992; 51 [8]) cited increased breathing capacity and decreased back and neck pain resulting from the gentle practice of tai chi. And a study that appeared last year in *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise* (2003; 35, 1972-6) found improved vagal function—associated with reduced risk of cardiovascular disease—in tai chi practitioners.

Despite the research, though, tai chi is a tough concept for Americans, who tend to chase after magic-pill, quick-fix choices and associate "fitness" with frantic efforts at exertion.

Learning to Slow Down

I journeyed into tai chi as a 30-something former aerobic champion, a worn-out, traveled-out fitness pro ready to explore

something different, mysterious and compelling. To be honest, anything that didn't involve spandex looked appealing at that point.

I'll never forget how it felt to *slow down*—to actually feel the movements and postures of tai chi, to realize that my body was laying down a new blueprint of movement, getting stronger as my muscles learned to balance from one position to the next. I then understood that most of my "athleticism" had been of a frenetic, fast-twitch sort. Sure, it looked great, but it lacked balance and was often really painful at the end of the day. After studying tai chi for a few years, I concluded that fitness in America was missing what I now call "micro-connections."

Americans are notoriously results oriented, not journey oriented, and in our

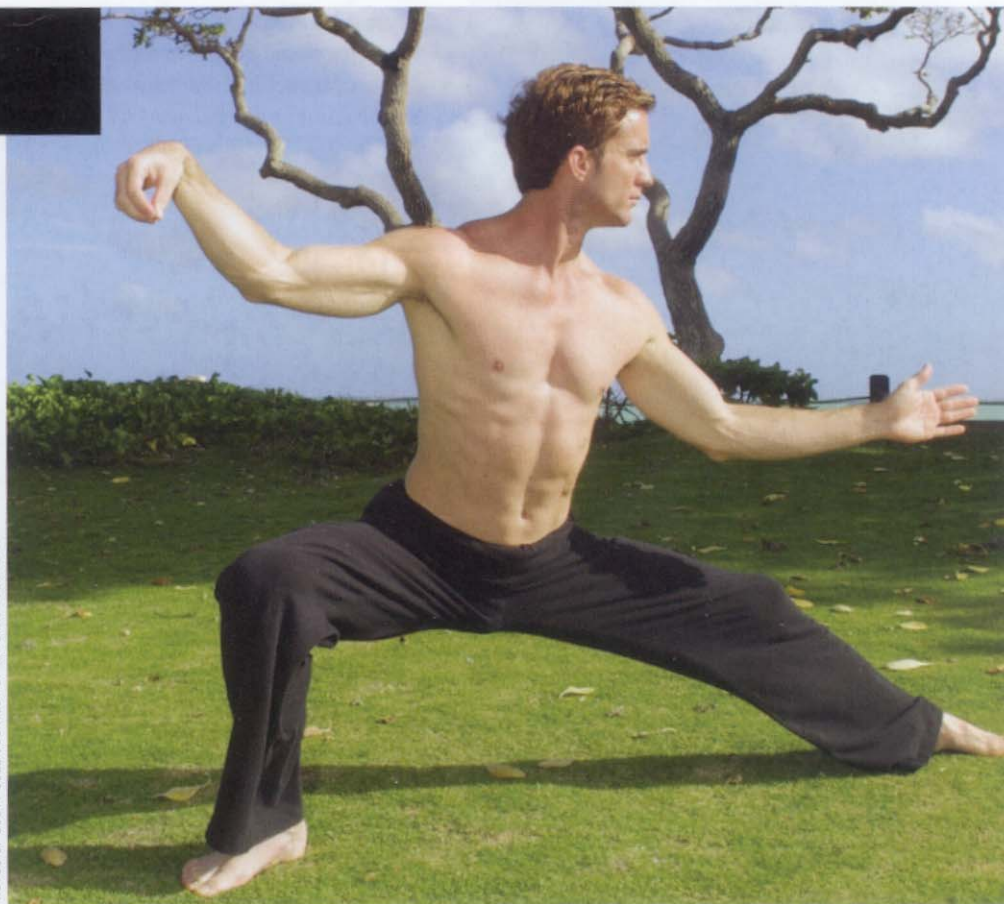
haste to get results, the journey between point A and point B is often lost. Tai chi

What's Your Opinion?

How has tai chi affected your approach to fitness? Share your perspective with us via e-mail. Write to websters@ideafit.com.

is all about the journey, the middle ground, the constant movement of life flowing from one situation to the next. It is the micro-connections that smooth out all movement, allowing the breath and "chi" (or energy) to move through the body like water flowing naturally around a rock. Deflective, powerful and centering, tai chi hones our awareness of these micro-connections and is often referred to as "a moving meditation." >>

PHOTOS OF SCOTT COLE COURTESY OF NATURAL JOURNEYS.



Going Mainstream

Well-studied martial artists know tai chi as both the grandfather and grandmother of martial arts. But although tai chi is a full-on martial art, complete with self-defense applications, almost anyone can practice it, regardless of age, weight or fitness level. Through teaching tai chi programs over the years, I have learned a few valuable tidbits about mainstreaming this ancient martial art.

Keep It Simple at First. Don't focus

too early on the "order of the moves." Chi kung exercises (ancient healing exercises closely associated with tai chi practice) are actually more applicable to mainstream fitness than tai chi performed in its traditional order. The therapeutic movements of chi kung, which anyone can do, can be taught and implemented immediately, whereas the entire Yang, Chen or Sun style of tai chi can take 6 months to 2 years for some people to learn. Unless a student is seeking that kind of journey,

it may be too daunting for them. I teach a combination of chi kung, traditional tai chi postures and what I call tai chi—inspired movement.

Allow Students to Find Their Way.

When I teach beginners, I start with bigger movements, because there is a learning curve before a person can make the movements smaller and more efficient. Essentially, students must discover their own "path of least resistance" and be encouraged to breathe and move. Just work-

tai chi is for everyone

Seniors. In America, tai chi programs for seniors are gaining recognition. Improved balance, strength and energy are all part of the tai chi equation for older adults. Enhanced energy flow can lubricate stiff joints; encourage reversals in the crippling pain of arthritis; and increase overall strength, reducing the risk of injury due to falls.

Therapeutic Applications.

People with cancer, fibromyalgia, rheumatoid arthritis, paraplegia and countless other physical challenges can benefit from the relaxing, rejuvenating slow movements of tai chi and chi kung (ancient healing exercises—involving movement and breathing—that are closely associated with tai chi practice). Many moves can be adapted for a chair or done in water. (If you work in water with a client who has an ailment or chronic condition, be sure to get permission from the client's doctor and clear the water temperature with the physician. For example,

multiple sclerosis patients should not work in warm temperatures, whereas fibromyalgia patients are often given the green light for warm water.)

Water Tai Chi. My regular personal training work more often than not includes tai chi—inspired movement in the water. Over 2 years, I have documented a 35-pound healthy weight loss in a client suffering from fibromyalgia. Working out slowly and methodically through all ranges of motion in warm water has produced amazing results for him, both in increased fitness level and in a near full reversal of his fibromyalgia symptoms.

Fusion Classes. Incorporating a tai chi/chi kung warm-up and/or cooldown is not only hip, but also effective. It lets you give an often-skeptical fitness audience a chance to experience how tai chi, or conscious slow movement, can enhance other activities. Yoga mixed with tai chi is about the best workout on Earth, in my opinion.

Martial Arts Classes. Mixing the slow tai chi movements with the fast martially applied versions really brings it all full circle. I teach a class named "Tai

Chi Training" (which blends both the slow and fast sets of tai chi); I also teach "Martial Cardio" and "Ultimate Strength," both of which fuse many moves from tae kwon do, karate, kickboxing, kung fu and tai chi. Janis Saffell and I merge kickboxing and tai chi in our "Yin/Yang" workout video, which offers quite an intense routine.

Kids. I was skeptical the first time I tried tai chi with kids but, to my surprise, they were all over it—so much so that it inspired me to create, finance and produce my "Get Fit America for Kids" program. In this program I merge traditional fitness with yoga, tai chi, nature-related games, stretching and partnered trust-building exercises. It was amazing to discover that tai chi was such a hit with kids, especially those in kindergarten through fifth grade. The little ones love the nature associations (postures with names like Parting Horse's Mane, Repulse the Monkey, Wave Hands Like Clouds, Snake Creeps Down, etc.). The middle-school kids love to focus on the martial aspects (kicks, brush pushes, push hands, etc.). All aspects teach deflection, not aggression.

ing on a few therapeutic exercises can be really life-altering for many people. They should not be worrying about “getting it right” or having their minds cluttered with an order that is insignificant to them.

Be Imaginative With Your Cuing. Imaginative cuing is very helpful. For example, my latest cue is “Aliens have landed.” It is amazing how many people refuse to bend their knees and relax their shoulders in the traditional Horse Stance. So I have students act as if they are aliens who have just been plopped down into this strange new world of Earth and are experiencing gravity, flow and breathing for the first time. Not only is this a fun visual, but it takes the edge off what many people perceive as a dauntingly serious martial art.

In the Fullness of Time

Whether your discipline of choice is yoga, Pilates, kickboxing or something else, understanding and employing the principles of tai chi can increase your proficiency. A whole new world of physicality opens up once instructors and students understand the flow of energy. A fast roundhouse kick has more proficiency and stability when

taught in a slow tai chi style, and a yoga tree pose gradually loses its wobbly entrance when centered chi principles are employed.

Tai chi is vast and exciting and definitely has a burgeoning following in America, but since it is not perceived as “hard,” the fitness masses tend to look elsewhere for their workouts. People ask me, “Will America ever really embrace tai chi?” “Can it afford *not* to?” is often my answer. But pushing tai chi on anyone would be out of keeping with the fundamental principles of the discipline. So I defer to one of my favorite tai chi teachings, which states: “When spring comes, the grass grows by itself.” So, too, will tai chi blossom in America, when it is time. ■

Wellness expert Scott Cole has lectured in over 30 countries and been featured in more than 400 publications, including Family Circle, GQ, O, SHAPE, USA TODAY and the Wall Street Journal. Scott first presented for IDEA in 1988, returning most recently in summer 2004. He has appeared on LIVE With Regis and Kelly, The Early Show, CNN Headline News and E!Style and is featured regularly

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