

Chapter 1

Matching T'ai Chi's Mind-Body Benefits to Your Needs

In This Chapter

- ▶ Finding out what T'ai Chi means
 - ▶ Matching T'ai Chi's benefits to your needs
 - ▶ Getting ready to take the next steps
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Deciding to look into a T'ai Chi practice can be a pretty big step for many Westerners. If you want to exercise, you usually choose familiar stuff like riding a bike, walking, running, or swimming. These exercises are pretty straightforward in the Western world. You do the movements. You try not to think too hard about them. You huff and puff. You sweat. You may hurt a little the next day.

That's just the opposite of T'ai Chi. Sure you do the movements, but you don't huff and puff. You actually try to think about and focus on each move, using your mind — not just your body — as much as possible. T'ai Chi is soft and gentle. You may sweat, but just a little. And if you hurt the next day, you probably did too much or did something wrong.

Whoa, that can't be good for you, can it? Yes, it is good for you, whether you practice T'ai Chi by itself or as part of a routine that incorporates familiar movement forms like walking or swimming. (See Chapter 2 for details on T'ai Chi's benefits.)

But I jump ahead of myself. What is T'ai Chi, really?

Defining the Grand Ultimate

If you've picked up this book, you likely have some inkling about what T'ai Chi (properly pronounced *tie-jee*, but often heard as *tie-chee* in the West) is — or isn't. Or perhaps you aren't sure, and you're intrigued enough to shuffle through these pages.



Everybody was Kung Fu fighting...

And just so you can answer the trivia question at your next party, *Kung Fu* actually refers to the level of achievement earned by work over time.

It just so happens that in the West, we use it to mean Chinese martial arts.

Nevertheless, I start with the nitty-gritty. *T'ai Chi* is an ancient internal martial art — a mindful martial art — focusing on smooth, slow movements that cultivate inward focus and free energy flow. This type of martial art — compared to a non-mindful fighting art — wants you to use your mind to focus and move and, therefore, the “mindful” part. Some people even call T'ai Chi a *moving meditation*. T'ai Chi is rooted in the Taoist (pronounced *dow*-ist) philosophy of harmonious living. (You can find some great Taoist pieces of wisdom in Chapter 24.)



You may hear the term *mind-body fitness* to describe movement forms like T'ai Chi, as well as other stuff like yoga. That term is basically interchangeable with the descriptor *mindful* that I use. Although the definition of mindful movement is changing practically daily, one can loosely describe it as a “physical exercise executed with a profound inwardly directed focus.” In other words, you use your muscles, but you also engage your mind. If you want more information on mind-body fitness, I've written an entire book on it: *Mind-Body Fitness For Dummies* (published by Hungry Minds, Inc.). It's all there.

T'ai Chi is a member of the martial arts family, just like all the other practices in which you engage in flamboyant, teeth-kicking combat. They all belong to the family called *Wushu*, which basically means “martial art” or traditional self-defense activities practiced with or without weapons. Other Wushu forms date back much further than T'ai Chi. Look closely at the movements that are part of the routines in this book (for example, the circling, torso-turning, hand-pushing, and leg lifting) to see the resemblance to fighting martial arts.

If you use your imagination to speed up the movements in Chapters 9 through 11 and pretend that a member of the Evil Empire is facing you, you can probably punch him in the stomach, knock him off his feet, or send him flying against a wall, a la “Wushu” style. Ouch!



But that's not why you practice T'ai Chi. Although some people practice T'ai Chi to perfect these movements (called *forms*), to gain inner strength, and to improve their combative martial arts, most people in the West practice T'ai Chi for the peace, inner calm, focus, energy, balance, stress relief, and body control.

Finding Out What's in a Name

I usually call this mindful martial art simply T'ai Chi, just as in the title of the book. But you need to know a little more about the name, the abbreviation, the translations, and the apostrophes that you may or may not see as you progress. The following sections explain what you need to know.

Abbreviations 'r' us

T'ai Chi is shorthand for T'ai Chi Chuan (tie-*jee*-chewon, said without dawdling over the “chew” then “won” but instead running the two syllables together quickly). For example, if your name is Susan Marie, everybody — except your mother — may call you Sue for short. But the West isn't the mother of T'ai Chi Chuan, so you can just call it T'ai Chi.

Parting from apostrophes



Then you have the apostrophes that may look so odd to Western eyes when they're smack in the middle of a word. Some teachers and authors use *Tai Chi Chuan*, simply leaving out the curly squiggle. Or they shorten the name to *Tai Chi*, also opting to drop the apostrophe because it seems so foreign. I choose to leave off the *Chuan* but leave the apostrophe in *T'ai*. Still, that doesn't really matter.

Many authors and other experts vary in the use and placement of apostrophes in the words used here. You may see T'ai Chi Ch'uan, Tai Chi Ch'uan, and T'ai Chi Chuan — the last one being the one I use. Note the different apostrophe placements. You don't need to get wrapped up determining which style is right or wrong, or get hung up on phonetics and things, unless you want to delve into the ancient classical background and write your dissertation about this.

Throwing in another

T'ai Chi Ch'ih is a contemporary method that has some basis in the concepts of the ancient classical form of T'ai Chi Ch'uan's movement. Its movements are only reminiscent of T'ai Chi,

based on the developer's own experience with it. This method has no true relation to T'ai Chi — except that it's slow and gentle.

Spelling: Not just for bees

You may also see T'ai Chi written as Taiji (tie-jee) or Taijiquan, which is more accurately Chinese but isn't commonly seen in the West. Same pronunciation, just more comfortable for the eyes because of the Latin letters.

Translation, please?

Now, about the translation of this T'ai Chi stuff. As with any foreign translation, you see a lot of variations. The name *T'ai Chi* can be translated from Chinese into English to mean something as simple as "The Grand Ultimate," "Great Extremes," "The High Peak," or "Superior Ultimate." Regardless, T'ai Chi means the incredibly important and unified really big thing.

Ch'uan simply means *fist*. Or you may see it used to mean *boxing* or some other kind of combative word. In this case, some may say the Chinese use *fist* to symbolize a complete embodiment.



So *T'ai Chi Ch'uan* is loosely translated as "The Grand Ultimate Fist" by some and "The Great Extremes" by others. You can choose which one to call it as you find out more. Does it really matter which name you use? A rose by any other name . . . Shakespeare was right.

Setting T'ai Chi Apart from Other Movements

One of the things that may seem strange about T'ai Chi is that you don't have to go harder, faster, or higher to reap fitness and health benefits. At first, T'ai Chi may feel and look unusual because its basic motto is contradictory to most familiar Western forms of exercise. (In China and other parts of Asia, T'ai Chi is mainstream, whereas fitness walking or jogging has been considered unusual, even odd, until recently.)

The T'ai Chi motto is the following: Go slow. Go slower. Go as slowly as you can. You may think that you are going as slowly as you can, but you aren't, so try to go slower. T'ai Chi is the complete opposite of hamsters-on-a-wheel step aerobics, hiking up a hill as fast as possible, or going as quickly as you can on the treadmill to burn more calories.



Always think sloooow, sloooooower, sloooooowest. You are the tortoise, not the hare. Remember that fable? The tortoise wins the race.



In part, the slowness of T'ai Chi movements forces you to get in touch with your body, listen to your mind, and integrate them both until you're moving as one unified mass. When you do T'ai Chi, you can't let your brain plan tomorrow's dinner while your body goes through the motions.

Reasoning Your Way to T'ai Chi

Someone may want to dip his or her toes into T'ai Chi — or another meditative art, Qigong (see Chapters 13 and 14) — for several reasons. These reasons may be simple or complex, emotional or physical.

Fixating on fitness and exercise

Can something that looks like adults playing freeze tag be considered legitimate exercise? Ah, little Grasshopper, don't be so skeptical! Yes, T'ai Chi moves slowly, but take a quick glance at the summary of health benefits in Chapter 2 to ease any skepticism.

You may not get beefy biceps or be able to drop into Olympic gymnast splits, but not everyone needs that kind of fitness.

You can gain the following benefits from practicing T'ai Chi:

- ✔ **Aerobic fitness:** You can do T'ai Chi very slowly or you can pick up the tempo a bit as you become more advanced. You can keep the positions taller with straighter legs or you can bend your knees to challenge your muscles to make your heart and lungs work harder. Both are legitimate ways to move enough to raise your heart rate so that your heart and lungs become more fit and healthy.
- ✔ **Muscle strength:** Depending on your abilities, you can do T'ai Chi with nearly straight knees, which is easy on your leg and hip muscles, or you can do T'ai Chi squatted low to the ground to fully challenge all the muscles in your back, hips, buttocks, and legs. You may also find that holding your arms up against the force of gravity and moving them slowly but continuously can be more of an upper body workout than you ever dreamed.
- ✔ **Flexibility:** As you progress, you can challenge the flexibility of your entire body by, for example, lifting your legs higher in kicks, squatting lower and wider during moving forms, or stretching taller in arm movements or warm-ups.

Teetering over balance

Many people gravitate toward T'ai Chi because it improves their ability to balance. In other words, it keeps you from falling. Particularly seniors, and anybody who has weak ankles or weak lower legs, can gain better balance.



The improvements happen because of training better proprioception of the nerves and muscles in the lower legs. Loosely translated, *proprioception* is sort of like tickling the nerves and muscles to improve the muscle sense of the body's position in space. With better balance, you don't wobble as much or turn your ankles as often.

Rehabbing injuries and strains

It is perhaps a combination of both fitness and balance that allows T'ai Chi to be a great way to get stronger and pain-free after injuries or accidents. I practiced T'ai Chi following chronic ankle sprains to regain strength and to continue athletic training. My collaborator, Manny, originally got into T'ai Chi because of a back injury.

Minding your mind

Whether you are stressed out or just busy because of work, school, or family obligations, T'ai Chi gives you a chance to find an inner sea of calm.

You can't do T'ai Chi and stay stressed out. If you move slowly and breathe correctly, your stress dissipates, leaving you more relaxed and refreshed. Over time, you find out how to incorporate this stress release in daily life. For example, you can practice while stuck in a rush-hour traffic jam or standing in a long line at the bank behind someone who has 20 million checks to deposit and forgot to sign them. See Chapter 21 for tips on incorporating the principles of T'ai Chi into daily life.

Capturing the culture and tradition

A T'ai Chi practice isn't about only the physical and the mental exercises. You can also discover the cultural traditions and philosophies. Perhaps you're interested in finding out more about Taoist principles. These principles are ingrained in T'ai Chi practice, which is a great way to embrace them and make them a part of your life. Maybe you want to discover more about Chinese history and traditions. The history and traditions are studies in and of themselves, but for a glimpse look in Chapter 5. T'ai Chi is one avenue for finding out more about such traditions.

Finishing with Wise Words

As the saying goes, there are many paths to the mountain. The path that you choose to take may be a little different than the path another person chooses. But when you get to the top of the mountain, the view is the same.

Along the path, you may find that practicing T'ai Chi is a means to physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual elevation. The principles and practice of this ancient, internal martial art can permeate every aspect of your life — from your physical health and fitness to your view of the world and the way you interact with others around you. But, sigh, it can't happen overnight. Perhaps that's one of the reasons T'ai Chi has remained slightly esoteric as a regular practice in the United States. In the West, everybody seems to want things quickly — 2-minute abs, 5-minute dinners, and 10-minute oil changes.



When you start your practice, one thing that you need to learn is patience. Manny says that in nearly every class he starts, someone pops up a hand and asks, "How long will it take me to learn T'ai Chi?" Manny says that he stops, ponders the question quietly, and then usually answers, "I don't know. As soon as I feel that I've learned it, I'll let you know."

You see, T'ai Chi is a lifelong learning. You're never truly done. Think of Einstein's comment that the larger the circle of knowledge becomes, the larger the circumference of darkness is. In other words, the more you know, the more you realize that you still have to learn. Anyone who says that he or she is a T'ai Chi expert is stomping all over one of the basic Taoist credos of humility, which is to recognize that you never know it all. Even masters are still learning. Don't set arbitrary time constraints for your learning. Attainment in T'ai Chi is measured in years or even lifetimes, not weeks or days.

As you dive into T'ai Chi, all you need to do for success in your practice is the following:

1. **Start.**
2. **Continue.**



That's all folks. Just remember, the journey of a thousand miles begins with one single step. So journey forth. Find peace and calm, and let the journey itself be your goal.

