

The Moving Joy of T'ai Chi Chih

"It's joy through movement," says Justin F. Stone, who originated it.

"It's a moving meditation," says Bill Pierce, who practices it.

"It's the exercise of the '90s," says Corinn Codye, who teaches it.

It's t'ai chi chih, the practice of a series of simple, elegant movements said to enhance the flow of the "chi", or life force, through the body. By performing these non-stressful, non-aerobic movements, t'ai chi chih adherents claim to circulate energy that creates a feeling of well-being. "Everybody is looking for stress relief, calm," says Santa Barbara t'ai chi chih teacher Corinn Codye. "T'ai chi chih is something they can do and learn quickly." That simplicity is the key to the growing popularity of t'ai chi chih -- and accounts for the difference between it and t'ai chi ch'uan.

Justin Stone, a Carmel artist and musician, practiced and taught t'ai chi ch'uan for many years, but found that almost none of his students had the patience and discipline to master the 108 movements of the ancient Asian discipline. Older people had difficulty executing some of the movements, and nearly everyone had trouble memorizing the long sequence. Stone decided to develop a series of simpler and fewer movements that would yield the same benefits as t'ai chi ch'uan. He developed 20 movements and postures that could be easily performed by anyone and called them t'ai chi chih or "knowledge of the supreme ultimate."

Stone began teaching the discipline in 1974. Since then, the movement has grown internationally. In the Southland, t'ai chi chih is taught in private classes, municipal recreation programs, community colleges and senior citizen centers. Nearly everyone who practices t'ai chi chih reports such results as inner peace, "centeredness", and a greater sense of joy in living. Bill Pierce, a student of Codye's in Santa Barbara, describes feeling "expansive" while performing the movements. "I especially like the fluid quality of the movements," Pierce says. "It's like learning a musical instrument and not being so concerned with the notes, but rather the expression." Instructors teach that fluidity by telling students to "imagine swimming through heavy air" as they perform such poetically named movements as "bird flaps its wings" and "daughter in the valley."

To an outsider, the movements have the elegance of hula, an appearance of expressive, slow-motion dancing. "Daughter in the valley," for example, is a scooping motion with the hands while the body rocks gently forward, then a separating of the hands while rocking gently back. Though t'ai chi chih is easy to learn, its real benefits are said to come from daily practice -- ideally, according to

Stone, 10 or 15 minutes in the morning and another 10 or 15 minutes in the late afternoon or early evening. "Properly done," Stone says, "the result should be a flow of energy and a feeling of well-being like the aftermath of an internal bath."

Balance is also stressed in t'ai chi chih -- balance, that is, of the two so-called components of the life force, the yin and the yang. Yin and yang are described metaphorically: Yin is cold, contraction, the receptive, female, negative; yang is heat, expansion, the creative, male, positive. The movements stimulate the flow of each force, then bring them together. Each t'ai chi chih movement ends with a balancing gesture called "the graceful conclusion" -- a reverent-looking posture with the hands, palm down, at the sides and the knees slightly bent.

Concentration is stressed as well, but unlike meditation, t'ai chi chih does not require silence, chanting or a conscious stilling of the mind. Instead, concentration is focused on the soles of the feet -- "to bring energy from the heart down to flow through the whole body" explains Stone.

Though much of t'ai chi chih is taught and explained metaphorically, practitioners say the results are tangible. Pam Towne, a Cypress instructor, worked last year with professional golfer Ann Marie Palli and this year will work with other golfers on the Ladies Professional Golfers Assn. circuit. "Ann Marie found that t'ai chi chih was right in line with things she was working on: relaxing her body, mind, focusing on her feet to get grounded before a swing," Towne says. Tais Hoffman of San Clemente teaches t'ai chi chih in a halfway house, to women who have just completed a 21-day drug/alcohol detoxification program. "It brings them right into the present moment," Hoffman says, "so they're not thinking about cravings, or what they may be doing later." Hoffman credits t'ai chi chih with solving a circulation problem ("I always had cold hands and feet, but never anymore") and giving her a "much more balanced energy level." According to Codye, many practitioners of t'ai chi chih have reported dramatic improvements in their physical condition, such as weight loss and relief of arthritis symptoms. (St. Luke's Hospital in Kansas City teaches t'ai chi chih to arthritics in its Center for Health Enhancement, and patients report greater mobility, coordination and flexibility after taking the classes.

San Clemente physician David Walker, himself a t'ai chi chih practitioner, affirms the physical benefits of the discipline: "T'ai chi chih reduces stress, and if you can reduce your stress, it can work on all kinds of ailments. We know ulcers, chemical dependency, emotional neuroses, hypertension -- a lot of common 20th Century ailments -- are stress-related." Walker has introduced a number of medical colleagues to t'ai chi chih. "I would like to see more of my colleagues do it," he says. "Doctors are some of the most stressed people there are." Those who practice t'ai chi chih regularly report that the benefits spill over into their daily lives. Since the practice itself is a process of remaining centered during

movement, they find it possible to maintain a state the Japanese call seijaku: serenity in the midst of activity. "I don't get lost in the external," says Bill Pierce. "Even walking down the street, I'm aware of my life force."

by Bob Howells

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