

# The Oldest Mindful Exercise

## T'ai Chi: A Historical Look

BY LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA

Now, more than ever, mind-body classes within the group fitness setting have increased in popularity. Of these, the ancient Chinese disciplines of T'ai Chi and Qi Gong are among the oldest group fitness forms on the planet.<sup>2</sup> Other mind-body disciplines like yoga also date back hundreds of years; but whereas yoga began as individual practice, both civilians and martial artists have been practicing these ancient group disciplines from their start. Although many may think of T'ai Chi and Qi Gong as softer, less intense mind-body forms, a close look reveals a surprising versatility that addresses most special populations including teens, those with arthritis, the elderly, and even athletes on recovery days of training or rehabilitating injury.<sup>5</sup>

T'ai Chi and Qi Gong evolved from China, and there are dozens of tales about how they began. This author's favorite says that, when Emperor Yang observed a snake and crane fighting, the slow, interactive dance between these two animals inspired him to train his army, not with the traditional aggressive approach, but instead with a languid, meditative dance that involved far more precision than random, haphazard movements done in haste. From both written and oral traditions, these movements date back at least four thousand years<sup>11</sup> and remain mostly unaltered.

Today's "Yang Short Form" is the evolution of an inspiration derived from observing those animals. The choreography of 22 moves taught the soldiers skill precision at a super-slow speed so that, when in battle, their movements would be more accurate. The goal was mindful movement—the mind must be keenly involved in the process of training the body. Furthermore, since precision is key, training commences with a super-slow speed to harness muscle contractions in a mindful way.

The original practitioners of T'ai Chi used the movements as exercises in both self-control and preparedness for more aggressive forms of attack. To create an optimal training environment, T'ai Chi was practiced outdoors. Soldiers preparing for war were dressed in shoes and clothing. If they were practicing for mental strength, then they wore no shoes. To be able to absorb more chi (life force) being barefoot is ideal because shoes add a level of separation between the feet and mother/father Earth.

As the tradition developed, T'ai Chi spread from the military to the public as civilians became intrigued with the moves and the benefits of better balance, increased strength in everyday activities and improved mobility. As more people realized the benefits of mind-body connection, movements were added to address specific areas of the body. These movements became known as "Qi Gong," or "energy exercises." Unlike the strict choreographed sequence of T'ai Chi forms, Qi Gong exercises can be practiced in any random order, at almost any speed. Whereas all Qi Gong is not T'ai Chi, all of T'ai Chi's 22 moves are Qi Gong moves. Figure 1 displays some comparisons and contrasts between Qi Gong and T'ai Chi.

Fitness professionals have been commencing movement to the right since the beginning: basic right, grapevine right and others. T'ai Chi has a complementary approach because it begins with the left side first as soldiers have practiced throughout history.

T'ai Chi and Qi Gong have been practiced for centuries partly because of the many ways they embrace simplicity. Neither equipment nor music is required. The movements are simple, often referred to as "complex simplicity." If one wishes to do exercises in random order, one chooses Qi Gong. Conversely, if one wishes to train long-term memory recall with historical, planned choreographic patterns, then one chooses T'ai Chi's Yang Short Form of 22 movements and never-changing forms.

### Even More Populations

Although most T'ai Chi is practiced standing, all of the forms can be modified to accommodate those sitting, kneeling and even lying down. For those not able to do movements involving both lower and upper body, movements with one body section provides benefits. Even individuals with no arms or legs can reap the benefits of powerful breathing and visualization tools.

Many practice T'ai Chi and Qi Gong because they gain both instant gratification and long-term rewards. Short-term rewards include:

- An increased sense of alertness and energy
- An increased sense of balance

FIGURE 1

	QI GONG	T'AI CHI
Name of the movement	Exercises	Forms
Speed	Variable	Super slow
Alone or Group	Individual need	Group speed
Specific order of choreography	Random	Strict
Pauses	Seldom	Never

- An increased sense in feeling more flexible and stretched
- An increased awareness of breath
- A decreased sense of stress

Long-term rewards include:

- An increase in measured strength of the leg muscles
- An increase in measured flexibility of the body's upper and lower muscles
- A measurable increase in VO<sub>2</sub> max uptake
- A decrease in blood pressure
- Better blood-fasting glucose levels in certain individuals with diabetes
- Greater sense of self-efficacy and reduced fear of falling in seniors
- A decrease in overall stress as reflected in cortisol levels, blood pressure and heart rate at rest.<sup>6</sup>

Like yoga and Pilates, core control is key. Practitioners emphasize attention to the belly button area as we draw it closer to the spinal column. Unlike yoga, there is no mindful savasana at the end because Qi Gong emphasizes mindful, moving meditation *all along* the process of practice, not just at the end.

### Arthritis

In June of 2009, *Science Daily* published proof that T'ai Chi reduces symptoms in arthritis sufferers, decreasing total pain and improving physical health.<sup>4</sup> In the same month, the *Arthritis Care & Research* journal published similar results, claiming that T'ai Chi and Qi Gong work because they are "inexpensive, convenient and enjoyable" disciplines that include detailed attention to a gradual increase in range of motion at multi-joint levels, while promoting a *social* component as people practice together.<sup>3</sup>

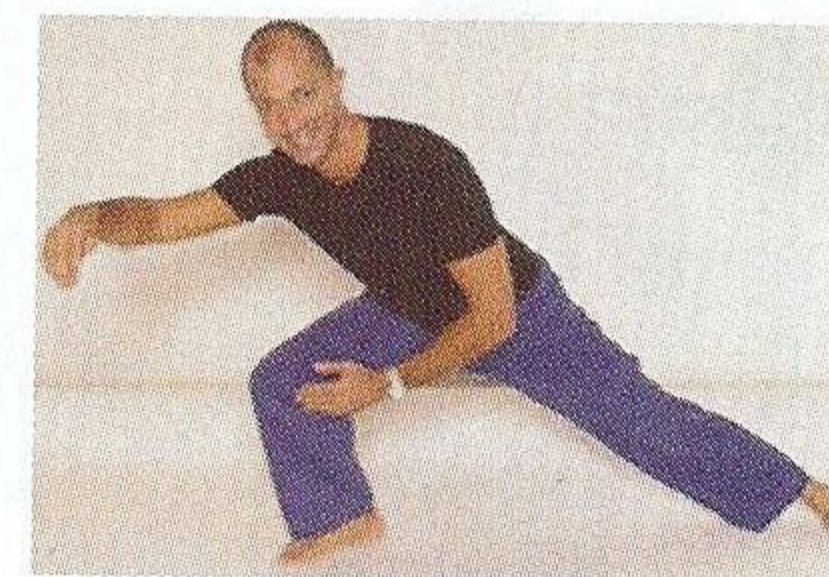
### Seniors

These Chinese disciplines also decrease fear of falling and increase self-efficacy in seniors. Research studies by the famous Dr. Li have proven that Qi Gong moves help seniors gain a greater sense of balance and overall feeling of well-being.<sup>7</sup> Still other studies prove that Qi Gong and T'ai Chi combat depression,<sup>7</sup> decrease hypertension sometimes as well as drug intervention therapy.<sup>10</sup> These disciplines address gait and balance training because they keep participants standing continuously.

### Even More Populations

Others that benefit from these disciplines include athletes, children and diabetics. T'ai Chi and Qi Gong have been found to assist blood fasting glucose levels to remain more consistent.<sup>8</sup> Athletes can learn both mindfulness and the importance of super-slow precision.<sup>3</sup> Children practicing Qi Gong learn patience, balance and to find tranquility and mindfulness.<sup>1</sup>

"Carry the Lantern" is an invigorating Qi Gong / T'ai Chi move to strengthen and stretch the legs, strengthen the muscles of the upper back and shoulders, and improve spinal strength. Stand with feet wide and turn the toes away from each other. Hinge forward at the hips (not waist) with an extended spine until it is parallel to the floor. Avoid rounding the spine. Flex the left knee and lean upper body toward the flexed knee until the chest is above the thigh. Flex the left shoulder until the wrist is as high as the shoulder (pictured here). Slowly lean to the right side, flexing the right knee, lowering the left shoulder while flexing the right, transferring the posture to the right as you "Carry the Lantern" in front of the body. Repeat 7 to 12 times slowly. The nonworking arm flexes slightly at the elbow in front of the hips as pictured.



### Fitness for All

Today, these ancient Chinese disciplines are proving more popular than ever as fitness professionals look to find fitness forms that apply to everyone. While speed continues to be an important aspect of fitness, it's important to note that power and strength have nothing to do with speed. AF

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