



LIVING WITH ENERGY

– By Pearl Sweeting

Fast-lane programs like aerobics, vigorous bounce-and-kick exercises, and intensive weight training require a certain amount of robust energy and health. For the person aged thirty-something and beyond who hopes to keep fit without physical damage, or without the investment of special outfits, shoes or gear, Tai Chi is an excellent choice. It can be done in pyjamas and bare feet!

Awareness

Tai Chi is known as a soft martial art, yet it is a powerful martial art despite its gentle movements. It is a mind-body exercise that integrates focus of thought with the body's movements. These are done slowly with deep, controlled breathing to enhance the flow of *Chi* (energy). In Tai Chi, outward strength or force is not used or necessary. Fluid movements offer rejuvenating energy to one's overall health. Leg muscles become strong, and balance, steady. When practiced accurately and regularly, strength comes from inner awareness, even for self-defense.

Relaxation / Meditation / Energy

In the Tai Chi form, the student is encouraged to modify any movement to accommodate a physical weakness, which enables learning the prescribed form without pain. Sometimes, physical weakness often improves. And anyone can learn Tai Chi – even those restricted to a wheelchair can practice certain moves of any Tai Chi form.

Movements are a complete exercise for all parts of the body, internal as well as external. Tai Chi strengthens, relaxes, unites body and mind, and nurtures physical and mental

development. The art is referred to as 'meditation in motion'. In time, for example in a year or so of practice, a dedicated student grows to appreciate both the art and the medicine aspects of Tai Chi.

Social Support

In the Tai Chi *dojo* (classroom), all barriers are down – but there are rules of conduct! It is possible to undergo a profound journey of self-discovery when practicing with fellow students. Being part of a group has therapeutic value. No one is isolated or embarrassed in the *dojo*. Everyone is encouraged. Tai Chi classes offer a strong sense of community, as students socialize with one another and find acceptance. The *sensei* (teacher) encourages openness that permits students to share difficulties.

At some point during the learning of Tai Chi, comes a level of awareness, strength, and maturity that satisfies. This is an "aha!" moment, when both the art and the medicine of Tai Chi are evident, and renewed focus of mind and spirit are attained. There is no rush toward accomplishment or struggle to have goals recognized.

In the practice of Tai Chi, our curiosity in the art grows, takes aim, and peaks in a moment of reflection or breakthrough. When that breakthrough comes, there is profound satisfaction. One learns to live in the moment, awoken to life's challenges and engage life. •

Pearl Sweeting is in her fifteenth year of practicing Tai Chi at the Grimsby Tai Chi dojo, taught by Sensei Debra Bilton.