

## **Tai Chi in Recovery; From Addiction to Tai Chi**

When people manage to break away from addiction, they free up time that they can then devote to healthier pursuits. One of the activities that can bring great benefits to their life is Tai Chi. This is not only a practice that brings physical benefits, but it can also improve mental well-being. There are also many people who use this martial art as a type of spiritual path. Tai Chi is probably not enough by itself to ensure success in recovery, but it can certainly become a useful ingredient.

### **The Benefits of Tai Chi or People in Recovery**

Tai Chi can be a highly beneficial technique for people in recovery to take up. It will not only help them improve their physical health, but also their mental well-being. The meditative aspects of this art mean that people develop an increased ability to deal with life. This can be particularly beneficial when people are facing the challenges of early recovery. This is an activity that people can practice throughout their recovery, and it will continue to bring them benefits.

The practice of Tai Chi entails three key components:

- **Movement**—slow and fluid movements improve the body’s alignment, posture, strength, flexibility, coordination, balance, and stamina. Many of the benefits of Tai Chi are consistent with other forms of low-impact exercise, with the added benefit of focusing on improved posture, balance and alignment.
- **Breathing**—focused and rhythmical breathing emphasizes a relaxed body and encourages strong circulation. Highly oxygenated blood flows to the muscles and brain during Tai Chi.
- **Meditation/state of mind**—a meditative state of mind during Tai Chi, coupled with the movements and breathing helps alleviate stress and anxiety. This in turn helps relieve pain caused by psychological and emotional factors.

Stress plays a major role in human disease. Mental stress affects the entire structure and function of the brain and body. As we age, we have a harder time coping with stress. This progressively leads to a decrease in our ability to adapt to both mental and physical stressors. When we are in a state of anxiety or stress it creates unnecessary tension in our muscles, which Tai Chi is known to release. Tai Chi also

increases our awareness and allows us to stay in the present and focus on the here and now. Simply staying in the present can alleviate some of the psychological stressors of the future unknowns.

The philosophy of Tai Chi is one of happiness and serenity achieved by moving and acting in harmony with nature and life's circumstances. By avoiding anxiety and emotions that deplete Chi, the balance of the body, we can improve our ability to transform a negative outlook or thought into a positive optimistic one. The mind is connected with the body and the body is connected with the mind. When we are more balanced we have greater opportunity to relieve stress, anxiety, disease, depression and anger.

Tai Chi is being successfully used to help people break addictive patterns. Breaking an addiction, whether it's to cigarettes or heroin, is a very stressful endeavor. The body and mind crave and yearn constantly. The reason Tai Chi and QiGong is so powerful lies in the essence of what an addict, or any of us stuck in unhealthy behaviors, craves.

Note the pattern of addiction:

1. A prospective user is looking for access to Qi, or life energy, whether they realize it or not. When Qi is flowing through us we feel good, at peace, and capable.
2. When cigarettes, drugs, or alcohol are first used, the ritual of using them and/or the chemical they put in the body causes the user to relax and open to Qi flow. But this is a false and unhealthy way to open to it.
3. Since this is an artificial way to open up to the flow of Qi, the mind and body do not learn how to keep the flow open.
4. In fact, when the drug, whether it's nicotine or heroin, is gone, the body and mind tighten up even more than before. The chemicals and their reactions in the body are unhealthy and cause the mind and body to get tighter, squeezing off more Qi than ever before.
5. The user is then required to use more of the drug or to use it more and more often because now it takes a more forceful dose to open the mind's and body's gates to allow the Qi to flow through.
6. Eventually, the user's dosages, no matter how large, do not open the user to increased Qi flow or a feeling of highness. Eventually even the largest dosages give the user only a lower-than-normal flow of Qi.

7. People who are heavily hooked on cigarettes or alcohol, and even more so with harder drugs, have a look of lacking life. They are becoming void of Qi. Their mind and body have become tight.

Tai Chi and QiGong provide us with a healthy pattern of access to life energy, or Qi. This is what we all want. When we hug a loved one, we feel their Qi mingling with ours. When we pet our dog or cat, they revel in feeling our loving intention in our Qi flowing from our hand to their body. Tai Chi and QiGong are tools to fill us with life, and they can be very effective tools for helping addicts find their way out of the maze they have stumbled into, finding a way back to being truly alive.

### How to Prepare for a First Tai Chi Class

This martial art is open to practically everyone. There are things that people are advised to do before attending their first class:

- \* Although Tai Chi is not a particularly intense physical activity, it may be advisable that people speak to their physician first of all. This is especially important for the newly sober, or for those that have a preexisting health condition.
- \* Traditionally, there is no real grading system associated with this martial art. Some schools in the West have introduced a belt system because it gives students a way of judging their own progress. It also encourages them to keep on learning so that they can achieve the next belt rank. If people would prefer to train in a style where there is a grading system they should check the availability of this before joining a class.
- \* There are now many books and videos that claim to teach people this art. The problem with learning at home is that it is too easy to pick wrong techniques, as there is no one to correct mistakes. It is therefore advisable to have a teacher at least in the beginning.
- \* There are different types of Tai Chi and a variety of teaching styles. Practitioners are advised to find something suitable to their aspirations. Those who are keen to improve their physical fitness might choose a class that emphasizes this. Those more interested in the spiritual aspects of this martial art should be able to find a group that focuses on this.
- \* Practitioners need to wear comfortable clothing when performing Tai Chi. The clothes should be loose enough to allow for full-movement. Some people like to practice in their bare feet but many choose to

wear Kung Fu slippers or comfortable sneakers. There are some schools that wear a specific uniform while training.

\* Most schools provide a free introduction lesson, and this is a good way to evaluate what is available.

\* In many parks around the world, people come every morning to practice Tai chi. It is usually permissible to just join in with these groups.