



...Those new to t'ai chi AND those wanting to continue their t'ai chi practice are WELCOME to join this community event. In each session we will focus on our breath, engage in gentle movement, learn t'ai chi basic exercises and over time explore t'ai chi postures (movements).

T'ai Chi: Reflections

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A PDF of handout is located at communityevents.mononaterrace.com under Health/Wellness Programs, T'ai Chi at Monona Terrace.

In the spring I wrote a number of articles for Monona Terrace t'ai chi participants. Some focused on t'ai chi as a healing art and the benefits. Others shared what studies are telling us and/or the philosophical principles of t'ai chi, such as the interconnection of yin/yang. A few described basic exercises, prenatal breathing or a t'ai chi posture. All seven articles can be found on the Monona Terrace website listed above.

This fall I'm going to write two articles. This one I'll simply call "Reflections" – focusing on odds & ends – things that did not necessarily fit in any of my previous articles.

In the course of studying and teaching t'ai chi, I'm often asked if I can recommend a t'ai chi video. Typically the individual is looking for a tool to help in his/her home study. While I think instructional videos can be very useful, I also offer some words of caution.

In t'ai chi practice we use our minds to coordinate breath and action. Studies have shown that mindfulness practice can actually alter the structure of the brain. This summer (June 2012) an article published in the Journal of Alzheimer's Disease reported that scientists from the University of South Florida and Fudan University in Shanghai found increases in brain volume and improvements on tests of memory and thinking in Chinese seniors who practiced t'ai chi three times a week. The control group showed brain shrinkage over the same time period, consistent with what generally has been observed for persons in their 60s and 70s.*

In addition, in the process of using our mind to grapple with the complexity of the t'ai movements, we enhance our body awareness. It is fairly common for people to begin to observe and make adjustments to "bad habits" (locking joints, leaning forward, adding unnecessary tension to muscles, etc). Therefore this mindfulness practice also leads to better balance, flexibility, strength, pain reduction, etc.

So let's go back to my words of caution. The benefits of t'ai chi come with integrating the mind, breath and movement AND the learning that is required to do this. Use class and/or video as a guide. Both can be useful resources. At the same time, be sure to develop a practice outside of these guides so not to fall into a habit of simply following. We all need to struggle a bit in our learning – turning towards our discomforts – that is the essence of t'ai chi.

Consistent and ongoing practice is the key. Most studies focusing on t'ai chi and showing improvement/change had participants engage in t'ai chi at least three times a week [often 45 minute sessions] for several months.

Another question often asked of me is... What is of greater benefit, t'ai chi, yoga, or meditation? In addition, I'm asked how I found my own way to t'ai chi.

I share that I was first introduced to t'ai chi in the early 70s and could not imagine how this slow movement could be of benefit. I then went on to teach an aerobic class for a number of years before finding my way back to t'ai chi. Only after practicing t'ai chi for a couple of years could I then sit in meditation. Initially I needed movement to help me focus my mind and feel comfortable with my body. As you can see, my route to t'ai chi/meditation was not very direct, which is often the case.

As to what is better? I encourage those who ask this question to try all three, along with other forms of exercise and avenues to mindfulness and relaxation. What's better, from my perspective, is what we are willing to do.

**James A. Mortimer, Ding Ding, Amy R. Borenstein, Charles DeCarli, Qihao Guo, Yougui Wu, Qianhua Zhao, Shugang Chu. Changes in Brain Volume and Cognition in a Randomized Trial of Exercise and Social Interaction in a Community-Based Sample of Non-Demented Chinese Elders, Journal of Alzheimer's Disease 2012; 30 (4), published by IOS Press.*