

Western Science Studies Healing Effects of Ancient Eastern Practice

By Carol Krucoff

Special to **The Washington Post**, April 14, 1998: Page Z28

Often called "moving meditation" or "the art of creating energy," tai chi began as a martial art in China about 2,000 years ago. Over the past century, it has become extremely popular as an exercise for older adults and is practiced by millions of Chinese each morning in parks across the United States.

But tai chi's graceful movements are so slow and deliberate that researchers from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore assumed it wouldn't have much impact on blood pressure. So in a study of the effect of moderate exercise on hypertension, they assigned the control group to learn tai chi. To their surprise, tai chi appeared to lower blood pressure in older adults nearly as much as moderate-intensity aerobic exercise.

"We were expecting to see significant changes in the aerobic exercise group and minimal changes in the tai chi group," assistant professor of medicine Deborah R. Young reported at a recent American Heart Association conference. After 12 weeks, however, the tai chi group's average systolic blood pressure had fallen by 7 millimeters of mercury, compared with an average of 8.4 millimeters of mercury in the aerobic exercise group.

The researchers studied 62 sedentary men and women, aged 60 and older, whose systolic blood pressure was in the "high normal" to "mild hypertension" range. Half the group was randomly assigned to a 12-week program of brisk walking and low-impact aerobics. The other half, which was the "control" group, learned tai chi. Both groups exercised four times a week for 30 minutes per session. And in both groups, blood pressure began to drop after just six weeks of exercise. "Clearly, in future studies we need a true 'no exercise' control group," says Young. "This study was a pilot, and more research is needed."

Extensive evidence indicates that regular aerobic exercise can decrease resting blood pressure by approximately 10 millimeters of mercury, and that mild exercise may reduce blood pressure just as much as or even more than strenuous activities, such as jogging. Mind-body exercises such as tai chi may provide an added boost to both physical and mental health, which is why the Eastern healing art is increasingly being studied by Western medical practitioners.

"Tai chi can help an older person become stronger and more stable so they are able to rise from a seated position more easily and have better balance," says D. Diana Yin, M.D., clinical instructor of medicine at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia. "And it can help a younger person become stronger, improve balance and help them deal with stress more easily and develop a sense of well-being."

"You'll know it's a good thing in one evening," says Dr. Edelberg, and it won't be long before you can practice basic movements at home. "Books and videotapes about tai chi are not the place to start," he warns. "These would be fine -- once you've taken a course and the instructor has had a chance to teach you the basics, make sure you're moving correctly and that you won't injure yourself."

Whipple recommends you start by asking your doctor if a tai chi class would be good for you. "Also, if you're a mature individual, ask the instructor if he or she has had experience teaching senior citizens." Mr. Whipple recommends the Tai Chi Handbook, by Herman Kauz, for further help.

One of the good things about tai chi is that you can learn and practice the art according to your own abilities. "Tai chi can be practiced on many different levels, and no one should push you past your own ability," says Dr. Edelberg. "There shouldn't be any strain."

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