

FAQ about Tai Chi with Jon Wilson at UPMC Center for Integrative Medicine

What can I expect from group classes?

My style of teaching is geared toward meeting each person where they are and helping them progress from that point. I will also help each student be patient with themselves during the process. Many students in the classes have no previous Tai Chi experience, while others have some in the recent past, often from other styles of the art form. The focus of the group classes is on the short, 'Essential' form that I teach, and a few core standing postures.

How are private lessons different?

Private lessons provide the most opportunity to work with someone with specific goals or those who would benefit most from focused attention. In private lessons, I can also incorporate principles and exercises from the other styles of Kung Fu to supplement our normal curriculum when I think a student would benefit from them. I also record and provide individual review videos for all of my private students for each lesson that can be downloaded or viewed online. This ensures students have easily referenced review material at their disposal and provides a more active on-going conversation between us to better benefit their practice.

Can you tell me more about the 'Essential Form' and standing postures?

As is common in many styles of Tai Chi, the 'Essential' form that I teach is a shortened version of a longer form, which was also a shortened version of a longer form. The Wu Style 'Essential Form' was created to introduce people to the art form and for those with limited time and space to practice. Once learned, it takes between 5 and 7 minutes to practice start to finish. The form focuses on five foundational or 'essential' postures in Tai Chi that do not require high levels of flexibility or mobility. Practicing the series of movements in a form provides the most well-rounded and complete tool for students to anchor their solo Tai Chi practice. The standing postures remove some of the complication of movement and are another important tool for centering and integrating the mind and body for this reason. Standing postures also increase lower body strength and stability, and improve posture, which will in-turn benefit practice of the form.

Isn't Tai Chi just for people later in life or less active?

Absolutely not! People of all ages and physical fitness levels will benefit from the improvements in agility, balance, mobility, attention, integration, and stress reduction. My students range from college aged to mid-eighties and are weight lifters, yoga practitioners, runners, and other martial artists. The focus of Tai Chi practice is becoming aware of subtlety and uncovering details that we would otherwise not be aware of. These discoveries lead to profound insights that can be incorporated into other movement practices and daily life. Tai Chi's slow, deliberate movements often equate to better movement at speed due to improvements in efficiency, coordination, reaction time, a less stressed nervous system, and a better ability to follow and change. Increasingly, this is why the art is being practiced by professional sports players, and cross-trained by other martial artists.

Can't I just learn Tai Chi by watching a video?

Unfortunately, without in-person guidance and feedback, we are only be able to pick up on very rudimentary and often, incorrect movements. Videos are useful for review and reference but cannot be used to learn the art from the ground up alone.

I have current or past physical injuries, what can Tai Chi do for me?

As someone who has spinal injuries and resulting chronic pain myself, this is a question I get asked quite frequently. Chronic or long-term injuries are frustrating and difficult to cope with. I often get students that have had knee replacements, hip replacements, shoulder tears, herniated spinal discs, or suffer from fibromyalgia, arthritis, or muscle tension. While Tai Chi practice isn't able to repair substantial physical injuries, it is immensely helpful for adapting to these new physical realities and providing the practitioner with additional tools to better move and hold themselves with less pain. Chronic and old injuries often lead to injuries of compensation where in an effort to limit pain or prevent re-injury, we change our movement or posture, thereby over-stressing another part of the body, causing injury or lack of mobility somewhere else. Tai Chi is an excellent way to reprogram old patterns of movement and posture, strip away layers of tension, and uncover ways in which we continue to protect the area surrounding our injuries.

The pandemic has taken a toll on my mental and physical health, can Tai Chi help?

One of the great things about Tai Chi is that practitioners feel lighter on their feet and in spirit at the end of their practice. In some cases, students discover they were unknowingly holding their breath, clenching their jaw, using their neck muscles to hold up their shoulders, locking part of their spine, leaning to one side, or over-tightening their core. While we may not always have time and space available during the day for a 30 or 60 minute practice session, each of the standing or movement postures can be practiced alone even if students only have a few minutes and are looking to step away from work or other duties to center the mind, relieve stress, or improve circulation and mobility. When accessed regularly, a student's Tai Chi practice can be a very beneficial set of tools to return to.

How quickly will I progress?

While of course this will vary from person to person, I have no set timeline for students to adhere to. My style of teaching generally focuses on students obtaining a functioning outline of the form first, then progressively adding layers of detail and refinements over time. Students should not expect to spend endless classes working on a single movement to perfection before moving on. Like any art form, the more one practices, the more a student will discover and benefit from their practice.

Is it normal to be sore after training?

Some soreness is normal, especially in the beginning of a student's practice. Soreness decreases steadily over time. Due to the fact that we are activating more stabilizer muscles and connective tissue, gently stretching, changing posture, and releasing areas from overworking, the body requires some time to adapt. I check in with students often and will provide tips to minimize any soreness that arises.

Does Tai Chi put a strong focus on breath control similar to Qi Gong?

The style of Tai Chi I teach does rely on settling and occasionally reprogramming the breath. However, breath control is not a direct practice in our style. Most changes in breathing come about indirectly as a result of a better mind-body connection, improved posture, and reduced stress.