

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

## **How would you describe your teaching style?**

My style of teaching is geared toward meeting each person where they are and helping them progress from that point. Each lesson is an ongoing conversation, and my priority is to provide students with tools and principles they can take with them to incorporate into daily life or translate to other physical practices, independent of the number of lessons they attend. I will also aid each student to be patient with themselves during the learning process, as doing so is also a part of the practice.

## **What can I expect from private lessons?**

Private lessons provide the best opportunity for goal fulfillment, learning, and improvement. The core curriculum of the lessons is centered on the short 'Essential' form and a few core standing postures. In appropriate cases, I will also create tailored exercises based on Tai Chi Principles, or incorporate principles and exercises from the other styles of Kung Fu when I think a student would benefit from them. I also record and provide individual review videos for all my private students that covers the content of that day's lesson. This ensures students have easily referenced review material at their disposal and provides a more active on-going conversation 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. The Wu Style 'Essential Form' was created to introduce people to the art, and for those with limited time and space to practice. Once learned, it takes between 5 and 6 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 complications that arise from 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 provide faster feedback to 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 more aware of subtlety and uncovering details that we would otherwise not be aware of when we move at speed. This is a primary reason the art is performed slowly. 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 and following a video?**

Unfortunately, without in-person guidance and feedback, we can only pick up on very rudimentary and often, incorrect movements, particularly when just beginning to practice the art. Videos are useful for review and reference once the practitioner has more thoroughly engaged in the practice 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 can be difficult to cope with. Many students 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 helping people adapt to their unique circumstances and providing practitioners 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, in-turn causing injury or lack of mobility somewhere else. Tai Chi is an excellent tool to reprogram old habits and patterns of movement and posture, strip away layers of tension, and uncover ways in which we continue to protect the area surrounding our injuries.

### **How does Tai Chi aid mental health?**

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 many cases, students discover they were unknowingly holding their breath, clenching their jaw, unconsciously elevating their shoulders, locking part of their spine, compromising their balance, or physically bracing to prevent injury or remain in fight-or-flight mode. Many of these complications occur as a result of PTSD, anxiety, depression, or other related stress conditions. In Tai Chi, the ultimate aim is to better integrate the mind and body to work together. The art in many ways, can be considered a form of movement meditation and as such, provides tools for us to also better meet ourselves where we are while aiding us to move forward from a new perspective.

### **How quickly will I progress?**

This, of course, will vary from person to person. I also have no set timeline of progression for students to adhere to. I generally prioritize obtaining a functioning outline of the form first, then progressively adding layers of detail and refinements over time. However, as discussed earlier, lessons are often adjusted based on where a student is starting from. In cases where there are other complications for students, I will also prescribe other exercises first to work up to form practice. Students should however, not expect to spend endless classes working on a single movement to perfection before moving on. Like any art, the more one practices, the more they 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 when they are relying on old habits to hold and move their body. Soreness decreases steadily over time. Due to the fact that we are activating more stabilizer muscles and connective tissue, 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.