

all the right moves

There's more to fitness than just sweating it out in go-for-broke workouts. The ancient Chinese art of tai chi, with its graceful sequence of movements, can do wonders to keep you calm, cool and collected—even as it helps you stay fit

Mention tai chi and there's an image that comes quickly to mind: solitary figures standing in a public park in the early-morning sunlight, proceeding as if in slow motion through a series of fluid movements. There is an extraordinary grace and serenity in this scene. What may be less readily apparent, however, is the range of fitness benefits associated with the ancient Oriental martial art form known as tai chi chuan.

A tai chi set consists of 108 separate movements. Learning them takes time, but regular practice will increase your strength, flexibility and stamina, while improving posture and coordination. Andy James (right), founder of Emerge Internal Arts in Toronto, also emphasizes the value of tai chi in combating stress. "Tai chi," he says, "teaches you to harmonize and still your mind, while being engaged in movement and activity." And for those of us tired of always trying to "feel the burn," that kind of peaceful, easy feeling can make for a refreshing change of pace.



1 rolling the ball

Imagine that you are standing knee-deep in mud. Your feet are parallel, just a little more than shoulder-width apart, and your arms are held in front of you, hands in front of your thighs, elbows relaxed. Now, imagine that a huge beach ball is rising out of the mud. Allow it to press against the underside of your arms. Inhale as the ball pushes your arms upward, to about shoulder height. Exhaling, push the ball back down again.

Strategy Note: don't lift your shoulders—keep them relaxed.



2 carry the ball side to side

Stand with your feet parallel, shoulder-width apart. Try to concentrate your centre of gravity in the middle of the spine. Once again, imagine a ball rising out of the mud—only this time, take hold of it with your right arm on top and the left arm underneath. Turn your torso to the right, carrying the imaginary ball in front of you. When you reach the side, roll the ball clockwise, so that the left arm is now on top, and carry it to the left.

Strategy Note: remember that tai chi is meant to be performed in a fluid, continuous motion, with attention to your breathing.

—Rebecca Bell