

THEWEEK

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SMART *life*

LIVE HEALTHY, STAY FIT

TREND ALERT

FORTIFIED
FOOD
FOR BETTER
HEALTH

GOING DENTAL

- NEW-AGE
CLINICS
- ANYTIME
BRACES

WHEN HE
TURNS PALE
ANAEMIA
IN MEN

FROM WATER TO LAND

REHAN ACES THE SHIFT

TAI CHI
QI TO
MENTAL
WELLBEING

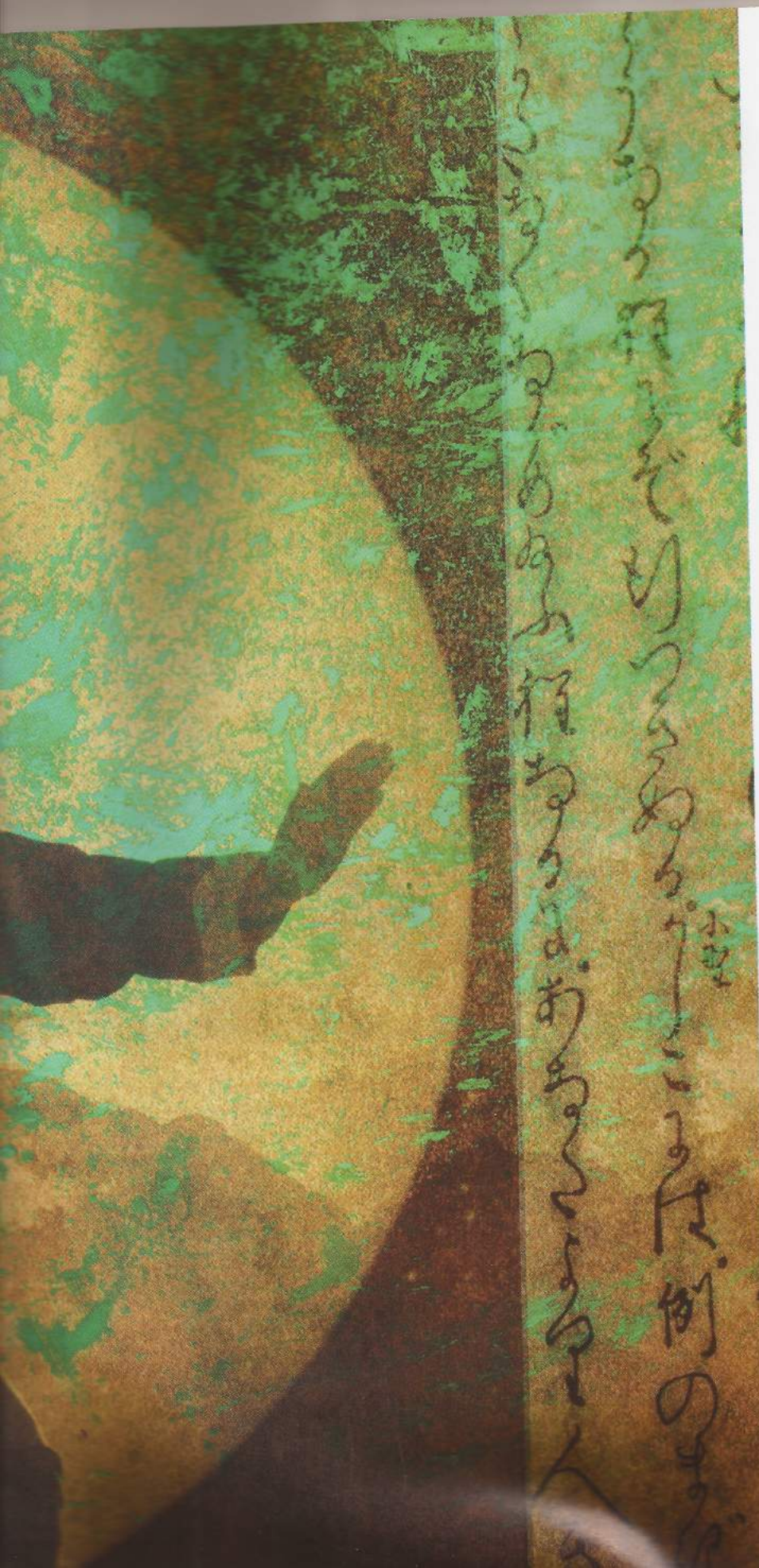


Slow motion

Chinese martial art tai chi is a curative tool that can keep the mind calm and ensure overall wellbeing

BY SUJA NATARAJAN



A vertical scroll with Chinese calligraphy in black ink on a light brown background. A hand is visible on the left side, pointing towards the scroll. The scroll is partially unrolled, showing several columns of text.

From a defence technique to a way to stay fit, to increasing longevity to a healing method, the Chinese martial art form of tai chi has come a long way. People who have studied and trained in this technique have, over the years, realised its numerous health benefits. Today, at a time when people are looking for holistic treatments as alternatives to modern medicine, tai chi has come to the rescue.

Tai chi is an ancient martial art form that involves graceful, slow, low-impact flowing movements that have curative, preventive and rehabilitative properties. "Qigong and tai chi are two healing practices that originated in China. There's not much distinction between the two. Though the intent of tai chi was martial, it is now being seen and practised more as a health and wellness exercise," says Muralidhara H.B., Zhineng qigong-tai chi teacher, Meridians Healing Energy Field, Mumbai.

Mumbai-based sensei Sandeep Desai believes that tai chi is an integral part of traditional Chinese medicine just as yoga has been an indispensable part of ayurveda for centuries. "One can enjoy and benefit from it regardless of age or physical abilities," he says.

Principles of tai chi

Every movement in tai chi is in tune with the laws of nature and the rhythms of the universe. "Tai chi is best described as a gentle internal art based on slow and deliberate body and limb movements. They flow in a sequence that does not tax the physical body," explains Muralidhara. He adds that it is based on the principle of the interplay of yin (feminine) and yang (masculine) energy. "It complements the two energies through a continuous flow or movement of body parts. This generates a massive amount of *qi* (energy force) or *prana* that comes into play in healing our body if healing is needed," he says.

It re-establishes your rapport with nature within and outside you,



Sandeep says. “You start focusing on your breath, mind, on the different parts of the body and on how they relate to each other. This is essentially the principle of life,” he says.

How it works

Tai chi is often described as “meditation in motion”. Although it does not use brute force, it does address the key elements of health—endurance, balance, flexibility, and conditioning. There is growing evidence that this gentle form of exercise, which uses movements, deep breathing and meditation, can prevent and ease health problems. Studies also show

that tai chi improves mental health, alleviating mood disturbances, anxiety and depression.

“The secret of good health and wellness is in maintaining an optimum level of *qi* in certain areas in the body called *dantien*, which is an indicator of emotional and physical health,” explains Muralidhara, “One must keep the *qi* flowing unhindered in the body channels and organs. A *qi* blockage in the body would lead to illness. The motto of *qi* practice is to remove those unwanted blockages to restore health.”

As tai chi works at the cellular level, the benefits are fundamental in nature. Muralidhara explains that qigong and

tai chi increase blood circulation and feed the cells with oxygen and nutrients. “When the internal organs get enough oxygen and nutrients for their function, they in turn produce internal medicines called biochemicals that restore health,” he says.

Mental health

Brajesh Girothra, 66, believes tai chi is an excellent tool to improve your mental health. He speaks from personal experience as he suffers from Ankylosing spondylitis, a condition where the spine is frozen resulting in extreme pain and limited mobility. Having had the condition for more than



a decade, he tried several alternate treatments, including tai chi, to avoid painkillers. "Physically I was unable to move and I suffered a loss of self-esteem and confidence when I was unable to even stand straight. I experienced depression, sleeplessness and bouts of anger because the pain was unbearable," he recalls. "After I joined tai chi, it helped me improve physically, spiritually and as a human being. My mental makeup is better because tai chi helps you live in the moment, cutting you off from all the worldly things." It has helped reduce his anger and pain, he says, and his posture, self-esteem and confidence have improved.

According to Muralidhara, depression, anxiety and stress are modern lifestyle diseases that throw the body-mind system out of gear. "A *qi* deficit causes emotional and mental issues like anger, aggression, jealousy, depression, etc. With an abundance of *qi*, there is a lot more clarity as it increases the availability of biochemicals needed for the healthy functioning of the body. When you practice qigong-tai chi (the martial art form taught by Muralidhara), the mind and the body work in coordination with gentle and slow movements in the backdrop of an activity that is deliberate and purposeful. It produces *qi* which results in a series of biochemical processes that revive the cells which remained dormant due to the dearth of oxygen," he explains.

Tai chi encourages you to be in the present and helps you focus your mind, says Sandeep. "Each tai chi move checks your sense of stability. It helps you to make the most of your natural abilities," he adds. The flowing movements help focus on breathing and mindfulness, promoting relaxation, which in turn reduces symptoms of anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, immunity-related ailments and improves mental health.

For Mumbai-based Vipin Paul (name changed), tai chi has made a huge difference in his life. "After suffering from sinusitis for nearly 14 years, I didn't think I would ever be free from this condition until I started practising qigong-tai chi. Continuous use of medicines and steroids had abused me mentally, and I was prey to mood swings, attention deficit, and low-esteem," confesses Vipin, 23. "After a year and a half of practising tai chi, it has improved my energy levels. Disturbing thoughts and anxiety have reduced, and I have been able to cut down on almost all my medicines."

Tai chi for all

Tai chi does not need any equipment and is suitable for all age groups. It is great for those who are looking to stay

Things to keep in mind

- Do not learn tai chi on your own through books or CDs. Learn from a certified instructor.
- Be realistic in your approach. Do not expect to learn the art overnight. It needs patience and persistence.
- Do not practice tai chi on a full stomach. Ensure a gap of at least three hours between a meal and a tai chi session.
- Always warm up and cool down after a tai chi session.
- You do not have to follow a specific diet. Eat your regular, healthy and nutritious meals.

fit and active without causing much stress to their muscles and joints. "It is especially beneficial for those who cannot sit on the ground to exercise. It doesn't require you to sit or lie down. It traditionally uses standing exercises, which focus on your core muscles, making you feel stable and rooted," says Sandeep.

Muralidhara points out that tai chi is a way of life. "People with health issues practice it to overcome their illnesses while healthy people practice it to remain healthy. If one starts qigong-tai chi early in life, it would be highly beneficial," he says.

But one thing to keep in mind, say experts, is that you cannot learn tai chi on your own. You will need a teacher to understand the principles of tai chi. "Find a good teacher and verify his credentials. The training that you will undertake is going to affect your central nervous system," says Sandeep. A trained tai chi instructor will teach you proper techniques based on your health condition. "The best time for practice is in the morning between 5-7. You can also practice it in the early evening between 4-6," advises Sandeep. "Leave a gap of at least three hours after a meal, before you start the tai chi session. Practice preferably outdoors where the air is relatively pure." □