

# Tai chi a framework for integrated living

**DEAR DOCTOR K:** I have heard that tai chi can have a profound impact on the body and mind. What gives this exercise so much power?

**DEAR READER:** Tai chi is a Chinese martial art made up of a series of graceful movements, one transitioning smoothly into the next. Tai chi is said to be good for both body and mind; in fact, it's been called "meditation in motion."

My Harvard Medical School colleague Dr. Peter Wayne, with Mark Fuerst, has written an informative new book about tai chi called "The Harvard Medical School Guide to Tai Chi."

Dr. Wayne discusses the "Eight Active Ingredients" of tai chi. He explains how, individually and in concert, they influence the body and mind. These active ingredients are:

— **Awareness.** The slow, deliberate movements and attention to breath, body positions and sensations foster intense self-awareness. This is a prerequisite to all other ingredients of tai chi. Emphasis on moment-to-moment awareness promotes mindfulness and improved focus.

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— **Intention.** Imagery and visualization contribute to the healing and physiological effects of tai chi; they involve creating a calming mental image of a very peaceful place (like a quiet seashore or snowfall in a forest).

— **Structural integration.** Viewing the body as a whole, instead of as a collection of independent parts, underlies tai chi's healing effect. For example, you're aware that your right hand is reaching forward and then turning sideways, but you see the arm as just one part of your body, working in concert with your body as a whole.

— **Active relaxation.** Tai chi's circular, flowing motion helps shift the body and mind into deeper levels of relaxation. Many exercises, and especially many other martial arts, involve great self-awareness and focus, but are not relaxed.

— **Strengthening and flexibility.** Tai chi has an

aerobic component. The integrated movements improve balance. The slowness of the movements, and the weight-bearing required to perform them, increases lower body strength and promotes strong bones. Slow, continuous, relaxed and repetitive movement enhances flexibility. And in contrast to some other exercises, tai chi is very easy on your joints.

— **Natural, freer breathing.** If you put a monitor on our chests during the day, you'd find that a lot of our breathing is shallow and jerky. The long, slow breaths that are part of tai chi resemble the way we breathe when asleep and generate a sense of peace.

— **Social support.** In ongoing tai chi classes, students develop a strong sense of community. Being part of a group has therapeutic value for many medical conditions.

— **Embodied spirituality.** Tai chi creates a framework for living with a more holistic philosophy that integrates body, mind and spirit.

*Write to Doctor K: [www.AskDoctorK.com](http://www.AskDoctorK.com). This column is not intended to take the place of seeing a doctor.*