

# Managing getting old with Tai Chi

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Improving balance and flexibility

Managing problems of ageing

Learning to look after yourself

Living in a declining body

Taking care of mind and body

Tai Chi and social activity for mind and body

Tai Chi based natural mindful movement

You know you are going to get old and you even know when so plan for it.

Preventative Tai Chi vs. Remedial Tai Chi – don't wait until it is too late. We see inspiring pictures of very old people actively doing Tai Chi – but we should remember that they have been practicing for many years and the ones we see are the ones who are still able to practice – we do not see the rest. So, my suggestion is to learn ideally before you are 50 but if you don't have that opportunity then start when you can – otherwise it's like stopping smoking when you already know you have lung cancer. Practicing Tai Chi like developing any other new skill takes time and effort – preventative Tai Chi is when you have sufficient resources to learn this new skill and you learn it before you need it. It is when you can join classes under your own steam, join in and enjoy them, when you can practice on your own – before you become concerned about the risk of falls.

Remedial Tai Chi is when you need it immediately but do not have the years or the energy to develop the skill, it is when you need one to one attention, when you cannot stand in a class for half an hour, when you cannot walk unaided for the length of a village hall – in fact when you are no longer able to do Tai Chi as such. Tai Chi exercises in this situation may still be beneficial but that depends ultimately on the spirit of the individual and the availability of a teacher. In this case I believe that in most cases what is really needed is not so much actual Tai Chi but rather some appropriate, possibly Tai Chi based exercises delivered on a daily basis by care staff or relatives with suitable knowledge and understanding.

Healthy mind, healthy body – Tai Chi serves both plus the social environment of a group class which is good for the mind and the emotional/spiritual self.

Average lifespan is around 80 years so at the halfway mark it makes sense to plan for the future. We know life is going to get harder work – so why not develop the skill of finding an easier way.

Ageing takes many forms:

- Loss of fitness
- Loss of balance
- Loss of stamina
- Low of strength
- Loss of fine motor control
- Many and varied low level issues, e.g. degrading eyesight, twisted ankles, digestive problems, osteoporosis, organ decline, e.g. kidneys, liver, prostate, bladder, reflux.
- Major issues – hormone changes, women and men, broken hips, arthritis, cancer, Parkinson's

Without preparation we are ill-equipped to manage these and to continue an independent lifestyle.

With an understanding of our capabilities and how to work with this changing physical/mental environment, we can be more confident and achieve more positive outcomes.

We are not caught by surprise having to go through a very rapid learning curve at the very time we are at our lowest point.

“A man’s got to know his limitations”.

We cannot do anything about the inner ear balance organ, but we can work on the software to improve sensitivity and to develop proprioception – our spacial awareness and internal body maps.

Working on elasticity the stretchiness of our facial and other tissues.

Working on the relaxation of our joints so that we are better able to self-correct our balance and to survive any loss of balance – even to survive better if we do actually fall.

Senescence of cells leads to a step down in metabolic capability, Tai Chi helps us to compensate for loss of strength with improved structure and usage – making the most of what we have left.

Working the mind/brain by giving it something complex to learn and develop.

Your body is always with you so there is always something you can do to develop your understanding.

When we study Tai Chi in later years, we call on all our intellectual abilities and experiences, all our emotional spiritual experiences and all our physical training and capability – it is a holistic process that involves the whole organism.

The philosophical basis of Tai Chi in Taoism and Buddhism gives us a continual challenge to understand life, ourselves and others.

The physical pleasures of moving our bodies more easily and the society of others are in themselves healthy and fun activities, coming together for group learning and yet being able to go off on one’s own to meditate and practice.

Tai Chi creates a widely distributed movement and control system rather than relying on vulnerable fine motor control in one limited area, e.g. we learn to use hips to carry the upper body rather than making large arm movements and exaggerated wrist moves.

Tai Chi provides a forum for us to learn about ourselves and others, e.g. anatomy, physiology, body mechanics, psychology, spirituality, so that from a basis of understanding we can take control of ourselves and of our lives.

Most of us learned to walk at age around 1-2 years. We did so in an ad-hoc trial-and-error way but have probably never thought about it since, so during our lives we have used our bodies and have acquired a range of habits and usage – from posture to the way we link our stress with our muscles. Tai Chi gives us a way to re-educate ourselves in positive habits of body usage and the opportunity to deal with the stresses and wasteful ways of working that we have acquired, so as to approach the last of Shakespeare’s 5 ages of man (and women).

What is it like to grow old? Many once active people perhaps unused to pain may say “Bloody miserable!” but it needn’t be since many old people are not miserable. Tai Chi and martial arts in general give us the opportunity to learn about pain, how to recognise the difference between different sorts of pain and how to manage each type.

We can consider ourselves to be the sum of our experiences – the culmination of our story if you will – so it is important to understand exactly what that means in terms of our real capabilities – clearly we are not a 20 year old with 60 years’ experience, which may be the way we envisage it. Rather we have those experiences to draw on as we try to slow the rate of decline in our capabilities. As with any area of life, education and training can help. Tai Chi covers the territory and so provides an excellent forum for this.

Losing friends and family – emotional challenges, filling time in interesting and useful ways.

You can remember when things were different so you know it doesn’t have to be this way (but it is!).

Changing perspective – getting grumpy – natural but perhaps not desirable!

Running out of dreams.

Growing old gracefully – whatever happened to raging against the light or wearing purple – but maybe with a degree of grace?

Learning to understand and manage the changing balance of our lives.

It is not just the practice of Tai Chi but the mindset it engenders. It is about the people who do it. If you want to become more balanced, strong, resilient etc. then work with others who have the same goals and especially with people who have those qualities, so as to learn from them.

I have been practicing martial arts since my first year at university age 19 always with a searching mind – searching for an emotional/spiritual and intellectual experience as well as the physical.

Now I'm not sure if at the age of 67 I am qualified to talk about this but I have met and trained with and taught many older people and learned so much from them that I think chronicling the experience has merit.

It is worth considering the idea that "There is no such thing as Tai Chi" – a statement that ranks up there with "If you met Buddha on the road – kill him" and is just as timelessly relevant.

The link between these two statements connotes a willingness to follow truth and reality – both internal and external – as far as we are able, in the understanding that it may not be what we think – indeed perhaps in the hope that it is not, but coming ever closer to conjoining expectation with experience.

Tai Chi exists in the minds, bodies and personalities of those who practice it.

Apparently being happy depends largely on feeling what you want to feel – so angry people can be happy because their anger lets them feel powerful. Which begs the question "what do you want to feel?"

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