Tai Chi: History, Principles and Theory
Tai Chi, also known as Tai Chi Chuan, Taiji, and Taijiquan, originated in China in the 17th century as a martial art and means of self-defense. Today the five main styles, (Chen, Yang, Wu, Wu Hao, and Sun) are practiced all over the world as a therapeutic exercise and health practice in the field of complementary and alternative medicine. Sometimes referred to as "meditation in motion", Tai Chi is both a physical, and mental exercise, incorporating the Chinese concepts of yin and yang, or opposing and complementary forces within the body, and Qi (Chi), the vital energy or life force. The belief is that Qi, or essential energy, follows pathways in the body called meridians, circulating this vital life force and promoting wellness. When there is a blockage or stagnation of this energy caused by physical or emotional stress, or trauma, it is believed that illness and disease can result. As a holistic health practice, Tai Chi Chuan is a mind/body exercise that flows through the body structure like a current guided by the mind and driven by the breath. Qigong is the practice of moving Qi through the body in single postures done in a repetitive manner. Tai Chi Chuan puts these postures together in what is known as a Form that appears as a beautifully choreographed dance.

The movements of Tai Chi are done slowly, with emphasis on balance, breath and relaxation. This results in increased flexibility, coordination, strength and focus. Health benefits of Tai Chi include reduced falls due to improved balance and awareness. The meditative aspects of Tai Chi Chuan assist in stress reduction, improvement in arthritis, diabetes, immune system function, sleep, fibromyalgia, fatigue and a number of other ailments.

There are 13 primary movements in Tai Chi Chuan and they are based on the Five Elements and the eight trigrams of the I Ching both of which are based on the Yin/Yang Theory. Yin/Yang Theory originated with the observation of the sunny side and the shady side of a mountain. The shady side was defined as yin and the sunny side as yang. From this observation wherein there was change through the movement of the sun during the course of the day, the originators of the theory recognized that change was the one constant in the universe. All things change through time. To understand Yin/Yang theory you must simply see the movements of your own body. For example when you draw your hand close to your face, one set of muscles contracts while another set elongates. All movements have their complements: inward/outward, upward/downward, left/right, forward/backward. The eight trigrams represent the primary movements of postural alignment. These are indicative of the joints for example: the hand is associated with pluck or pull, the elbow with elbow strike, the shoulder with shoulder strike, press means to crush as in between two hands, roll back is inward, downward, backward movement, and ward-off is an upward, outward, forward movement, split is a separating motion, and push is apparent. The Five Elements are associated with the stepping movements of the legs forward, backward, left, right, and central equilibrium. So together these represent the 13 primary movements of Tai Chi Chuan upon which all Tai Chi postures are based.

The controlled movements in Tai Chi, with names such as "cloud hands", "white crane spreads wings", and "grasp sparrows tail", when done on a regular basis, have been shown to improve health in a number of studies. With the opening and closing of the joints of the body known as "gates" in Tai Chi, the lymph system is activated, thereby increasing T-cell production which supports the immune system.

A number of scientific studies have been done and continue to focus on the benefits of Tai Chi practice for the elderly and in specific disease entities. The deliberate movements combined with breath, have demonstrated to have a profound effect on improving health. The Mayo Clinic has listed Tai Chi as one of the top 10 complementary health practices. A study by Steven
Wolf, PhD at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta, GA found that people taking part in a 15 week program decreased their risk of falls by 47.5%. UConn Health Center in Farmington, CT conducted a study that showed Tai Chi to be an effective intervention to improve strength and balance. An article by Dr. Oz, written in the January 31, 2011 issue of Time Magazine reports a 2006 study from New Zealand revealed that “Tai Chi improved the overall mood in patients with traumatic brain injury in a number of ways, including decreasing sadness (12%), confusion (12%), anger (8%), tension (15%), and fear (10%) and increasing energy (14%) and happiness (7%).”

Utilizing the Tai Chi principle, "softness overcomes hardness", injury can be avoided while caring for someone who may fall or even strike out at the caregiver. The increased awareness, improved flexibility and balance also contribute to safety for both the patient and caregiver. Learning to maintain certain postures at all times, including flexed knees, relaxed shoulders and focused body weight distribution helps to stabilize the caregiver while assisting with direct patient care. For the patient with Alzheimer's, following simple movements with repetition offers a means of exercise without increased mental or physical stress. Though there is no evidence that Tai Chi prevents the progression of Alzheimer's, there is evidence that new neural pathways are developed in the brain. The effect of this may manifest in the slowing of symptoms. An Alzheimer's patient can experience all of the other benefits of Tai Chi including increased flexibility, evidenced by an increased ability to perform activities of daily living and a decrease in illness as the result of improved breathing and overall immune system function. Quality of life is improved for both patient and caregiver. As an activity that can be done alone or in a group as a means of social contact, Tai Chi helps connect us to our self and to our community. Connection to the environment occurs as we relate to the Five Elements. These are the elements of Metal/Air, Wood/the living energy, Fire, Water, and Earth.

**Simple exercises that can be practiced alone or in a group while sitting or standing:**

1. Shake both hands vigorously overhead, be sure to breathe, shoulders down and relaxed.

2. Make big circles in front of your body with both hands, keep elbows and hands loose.

3. Lift and drop shoulders, breathing in when lifting, out when dropping, if done standing, allow knees to drop up and down slightly with movement.

4. "The Wave" hold arms out in front, hands relaxed, palms down, gently lift arms out in front, up to the level of the shoulders, shoulder width apart, drop elbows in close to the body, palms face outward, fingertips up, drop hands and then repeat.

5. Circle knees: when standing, flex knees slightly holding knees with both hands and make small rotating circles with your knees 5 times, reverse direction. Your weight will automatically shift with the movement. When seated, hold knees with both hands, lean forward slightly, shift weight to the front of the foot and rotate knees, both directions.

6. Patting Out: Also known as Soong Ku “breathing into the bones”. Start at the forehead and pat vigorously but gently with alternating hands about 10 times, then bring hands to the back of the head, then to the top of the head, patting 10 times each using alternating hands.
Breathing Into The Hand: A Five Minute Meditation Technique for the Caregiver
Using a timer will help you to focus on the exercise and not on the time.

1. Sit in a quiet space, holding one hand out in front with your palm open and facing up.
2. Notice if there is any tension in your body, particularly in your shoulders, now relax your body.
3. Look at your hand, eyes must remain open and focused on your hand only.
4. Begin to breathe, in and out, coordinating your inhalation and exhalation with the opening and closing of your hand, whichever you choose.
5. As you breathe, focus on full inhalation and full exhalation in sync with the opening and closing of your hand.
6. Allow your breath to slow, maintaining the sync with your hand movement.
7. After 5 minutes, take a full cleansing inhalation and exhalation and enjoy your relaxed state.

Grounding and Centering
Grounding training is simple when applying Tai Chi techniques. These techniques can be applied anywhere, and can be practiced at any time. Centering yourself increases your self control physically and emotionally. Grounding yourself helps you to stabilize yourself on the earth and develops balance.

1. Stand with feet shoulder width apart.
2. Press the tip of the tongue on the roof of the mouth at the alveolar ridge behind the front teeth.
3. Soften the backs of the knees and sink slightly into the thighs.
4. Create a small space under the arms about the size of a dove’s egg.
5. Gently but firmly sink your shoulders and elbows downward.
6. Tuck your chin, and your tailbone lengthening the spine.
7. Float the crown of your head up.
8. Imagine roots growing down and out into the earth in all directions from your feet.