



HOW TO PRACTICE TAIJIQUAN TO ATTAIN SUPER HEALTH AND LONGEVITY

Teachings of the 98 year old Famous
Master Wu Tunan

Editors Note:

Rejuvenation and longevity are the ultimate benefits of Tai Chi Chuan. Masters of the ages past have been rumored to live beyond the normal life span. Chan San Feng, the founder of Tai Chi Chuan, reportedly lived more than 200 years. Today we marvel at these stories and wonder if they could be true.

In modern times, there is a living document of the rejuvenating powers of Tai Chi Chuan: Wu Do-Nan. The September 1987 issue of this newsletter completed a three part interview between Mr. Jou and Wu Do-Nan. This took place 2 years ago when Wu Do-Nan was 102 years old. Here we reprint another interview carried by the China Daily newspaper six years ago when Wu Do-Nan was 98 years old. (His name is translated into english a little differently: Wu Tunan) The Master is now 104 years of age!

Consider the advice presented here, and to discover something to benefit your practice for a long and healthy life. A special thanks to Janet for contributing this article that she brought from China.

CHINA DAILY carried a report in its Nov. 11, 1981 issue entitled "A Long Life of Taijiquan." The opening three paragraphs read as follows: "At 96, Wu Tunan still has good eye sight and hearing, is alert and clear in speech. His tall figure with its straight back and steady walk is that of a much younger man."; "Doctors find that Wu's heart functions like that of an athlete, his blood pressure is normal, he can walk several dozen miles, and once a week he climbs the hills at Badachu, a scenic spot on the outskirts of Beijing. His wife Liu Guizhen, 10 years his junior, is almost as healthy." ; "Wu and his wife attribute their health to the practice of Taijiquan, traditional Chinese shadow boxing. Wu, who is vice chairman of the Beijing Wushu Association, has been practising Taijiquan for nearly 90 years."

Aside from the above, the writer has often listened with admiration to the Master's quoting from memory famous passages found in traditional Chinese literary, medical, historical and philosophical works; and watched with keen interest how the old man could still toss a student, 50, 60, or 70 years his junior several feet away in the pushing-hands exercise.

Longevity plus such super health and clarity of mind is surely something to be envied at and worth striving for. The way of attainment sounds rather simple, the practice of Taijiquan. But why and how?

There are now in operation 161 Taijiquan teaching posts with about 750 coaches in Beijing. The yearly enrolment in 1981 amounted to nearly 50,000, reaching a total of over 250,000 since 1974. Statistics have shown that of those participants with chronic diseases, over 90 percent have obtained marked improvement, and many have returned to their jobs. However, men as old and healthy as Master Wu are still rare, even among Taijiquan practitioners. Is it because Master Wu is an exception to the rule? Or is it because the majority of Taijiquan practitioners, enthusiastic and benefited as they are, have not practiced Taijiquan in the way as Master Wu has? If so, how should it be done to attain such super health and longevity?

One fine morning, the writer had a long chat with the Master, seeking an answer. Through our discussion, the Master's teachings emerged. My questions, and Master Wu's replies, are as follows:

Zeng:

Factors contributing to health and longevity are many. Why do you attribute your super health to the practice of Taijiquan and not to anything else? Tens of thousands of people practise Taijiquan every morning in Beijing, and as a result of its very good health promoting effects, the number is still growing. However, compared with what you have attained, it seems the majority are not getting the full benefits promised by the art. Is it chiefly because the other factors influencing their health and longevity are possibly not as favourable as yours? Or is it because they have not practised Taijiquan as you have or as you deem it should be?

Wu:

Factors influencing health and longevity, favourable or unfavourable, are indeed numerous. Some important ones, like heredity, geographical environment, living and working conditions, affect us more basically than Taijiquan. Obviously, these factors are either beyond our control, or not easily altered by us. However, their ill effects may be lessened, and good effects enhanced by the practice of Taijiquan. In my own case: I was not born strong but very weak. I suffered lung, liver and spleen troubles as a child, until taking up Taijiquan at the age of nine. I gradually overcame my weakness after eight years of vigorous training under the tutorship of Wu Jianquan, plus another four years under the strict coaching of Master Yang Shaohou.

My health originally was less favourable than the average person's. As to living conditions, I have been through very stressing times. But I persisted in correct practice of Taijiquan under all circumstances.

Zeng:

In other words, it is not just the practice of Taijiquan, but the persistent and correct practice which leads to super health and longevity. Right?

Wu:

Precisely so. But I must add: by persistence, I mean life-long persistence. By correctness, I mean full accordance with the fundamental principles set in the Taijiquan classics.

Zeng:

Such a high standard is very hard to attain.

Wu:

Yes, and no.

It is certainly hard for the sceptics and the half-hearted. These often quit after having missed a few lessons, or upon finding their movements still awkward after a mere few months of practice. But those who are serious in their pursuit of super health and longevity, and who realize they are indeed attainable are therefore determined to spend the necessary time and effort required. They are usually attentive to their instructors and sensitively aware of the subtle differences in their own movements and feelings, depending on whether they follow the instructions faithfully or not. Generally, after learning and practicing in such a manner for a year or so, the movements of these students become much more coordinated and flowing, their health noticeably improves. The hour or so of daily practice becomes a time of joy, relaxation and self-achievement. Persistence then is no longer a problem. The only issues are how to make the best possible progress in keeping with age, constitution, time available for learning and practicing, and the finding of a good teacher and good practice companions.

Zeng:

That I can well see from my own experience. I started learning Taijiquan at 46 when I found my old favourite sport, weightlifting, a bit beyond my age. As Taijiquan is in many ways very different from weightlifting, I found the movements quite complicated and I did them awkwardly at first. However, with some knowledge of Taijiquan's health promoting effects, I determined to learn this traditional system of health promoting exercise and martial art. It was new to me, and not only suitable to my age but an art I could practice to the end of my days. After a year of intensive learning and practice I was doing the movements more easily. A feeling of relaxation and well-being arose with every practice session.

Even when conditions would not allow me to do Taijiquan I tried to practice it in my mind, coupled with diaphragm breathing. In this way, I had not only managed to have avoided forgetting the sets I had learned, but also could relax under conditions of stress. At the end of 1974, though then already 59, I started to learn new sets of Taijiquan. I found improvement possible even with two knees suffering from bone arthritis, in fact I was the runner-up in the 1978 Beijing Taijiquan Contest for the Aged. What a great joy and satisfaction!

Today, Taijiquan is as much a daily necessity to me as eating and sleeping. What I am most eagerly seeking now is a deeper understanding of the art. As you are one of the oldest Taijiquan masters of our time, you have studied both traditional Chinese medicine and western medicine and are one of the earliest advocates of scientific Taijiquan, I admire you sincerely.

Now what is your interpretation and evaluation of the cardinal principles of the Taijiquan classic from a scientific point of view? What are the most important points to observe in Taijiquan in order to get the best possible results?

Wu:

I am pleased with what you have experienced and that you are eager to hear from me. Let me say first that the basic principles and methods of Taijiquan and the healthful benefits ensured by this age-old system are in harmony with recent findings in physiology, medicine, sports science and other related fields.

Zeng:

This is very interesting and important. Please elaborate.

Wu:

Of course, I am not prepared to give you a comprehensive presentation, but I will try to cover the most salient points.

The first thing to note is the tenet in physiology that a proper functioning of the nervous system, with the cerebral cortex as its core, is a prerequisite to the proper functioning of

the different systems of the human body. Compare this with the cardinal principle of Taijiquan that the art depends primarily of the mind, not on the muscles, and that one must cultivate the subtle directing power of the mind and maintain an ever tranquil state, free from all outside disturbances and vexations. This cultivation is realized through an ever higher coordination not only of such body parts as the hands, eyes, feet and the torso, but also a harmony of the external body movements with the inner changes of the mind-intent, the respiration and the movement of the "qi." Such a state is termed in Taijiquan: "The upper and lower in correspondence; the internal and the external in unison."

To practise or seek such a high coordination for 30-60 minutes everyday is very beneficial to the nervous system and therefore to the whole body, in two ways. Firstly, it will greatly improve the efficiency of the directing power of the mind through exciting, by concentration, a certain part of the cerebral cortex. Secondly, according to the phenomenon of negative inducement in physiology, increasing the excitation of one part of the cerebral cortex will necessarily lessen the excitation in the others, thus suppressing excitation focuses due to chronic illness or prolonged stress and vexation, and so encouraging recovery.

Zeng:

That certainly is an important basic concept to be kept in mind. Are there any recent findings relevant to the directing power of our mind?

Wu:

Recent findings in physiology, brain science and other related fields have further revealed that not only voluntary muscles are under the control of our mind; by focusing attention on certain parts of one's body and thinking in a certain way, after a short period of training with the help of the technique and instrumentation called "biofeedback", certain inner activities can be controlled or aroused by one's mind as well (the same kind of phenomenon had long been noticed and made use of by Taijiquan masters hundreds of years ago in China.) One successful experiment made in recent years in the West is the raising or

lowering of fingertip temperature by the will of mind, which actually is the result of the opening or closing of the capillaries brought about by one's focused thinking. This offers a scientific interpretation of the slight distension and wriggling often sensed by many Taijiquan practitioners in their fingertips or palm centers together with a visible reddening of these parts when their minds are focused on them. Sometimes one can also feel a stream of warmth running through a certain part of his body when performing a certain movement, that could well be the widening of some bigger blood vessels, allowing more blood to circulate through.

According to the Taijiquan classics, that something running inside is "qi". And according to the traditional Chinese medical theory, "qi" is something innate in man from birth, something invisible but vital to life. The free moving of "qi" clears the way for the blood to circulate freely, though "qi" circulates through its own network of main and collateral channels, along which the acupuncture points are distributed. The existence of "qi" had never been scientifically identified until a few years ago, when some Chinese scientists with the help of modern instruments, succeeded in finding out first in 1978 that the "qi" emitted from the palm centre of a "qigong" master is a kind of far infra-red radiation adjustable by the rise and fall of low frequency electrical waves. Then in 1979, it was again demonstrated that the "qi" emitted from the fingertips of another "qigong" master was a current of fine particles with electrical charge. Although a comprehensive understanding of "qi" is still a subject for further research, and whether the sense of warmth and wriggling is the result of a freer movement of blood, or of "qi" or of both remains to be ascertained scientifically, practicing Taijiquan in the way of "letting the mind direct the qi; and letting the "qi" circulate through the body" will greatly improve your health and lead to longevity. If not practised in this manner, you will still receive some benefits, but not much more than spending the same amount of time walking or doing calisthenics.

Zeng:

Your talk on the relationship between the most salubrious effect and the most characteristic feature of Taijiquan is a point of great interest to

me. Now, what would you rate as next in importance and ingenuity?

Wu:

There are a few more points that I would like to mention, but not necessarily in the order of their relative importance and ingenuity. One special feature that almost everyone can see when watching a good Taijiquan performance or practice is the slow, pliable, even, rounded and continuously flowing movements done smoothly without apparent effort from the beginning to the end of a complete set which generally lasts about 5-8 minutes for the shortest simplified version and 20-40 minutes for the longer ones. When it comes to an end, one usually finds light perspiration on the performer's skin even in cold weather, but without finding him out of breath.

Zeng:

This is quite a unique feature. How does it come about, and what particular benefits and advantages does it offer?

Wu:

Aside from what are noticeable to the casual observer as described above, there is, or should be, in these continuously flowing movements, an alternative change from "insubstantiality" to "substantiality" or from "to open" to "to close" as they are termed in the Taijiquan classics. Or simply as the actions themselves show: there is a constant shift of body weight, letting the greater part of it be borne on one of the legs (bent to a certain angle) alternatively, as well as an alternative change of stretching-out and drawing-in movements, keeping the whole body alternatively in a stretched or relaxed state both internally and externally. Practicing Taijiquan with a greater part of bodyweight borne on a single and bent leg alternatively for 20-40 minutes in continuity is certainly demanding both to the mind and the body, thus comes the perspiration. Keeping a part of or the entire body in a stretched or relaxed state alternatively is a good means of conserving energy and a way of letting the workload be shared evenly by the different body parts. That, together with coupling deep respiration naturally with body movements in rhythmic harmony as far as possible, makes a good supply of oxygen available right from

the beginning to the end of the workout. Thus no oxygen debt is formed, and the performer will not be out of breath.

The benefits and advantages concomitant to this unique feature are many: as the exercise is actually quite demanding, so it enhances cardiovascular efficiency, increases the elasticity of the lung tissue and improves digestion and assimilation. As it is generally done slowly and gently, it is not too hard a task even for the aged or the weak. And as a good supply of oxygen is available at all times and no oxygen debt is being built up throughout the whole practice, it is entirely suitable for those with chronic illness such as high blood pressure, or pulmonary tuberculosis.

Zeng:

That explains the popularity of Taijiquan with people of different ages and health problems. Are there any new findings regarding the health promoting effects in relation to this aspect of its uniqueness?

Wu:

There certainly are. I'll just cite one of the latest. As reported in the newspaper Tiyubao (The Sports Gazette) a researcher at the Henan Medical College made an observation of the changes in the immune functions of nineteen 50-68 years old Taijiquan practitioners and twenty-five 18-32 years old middle and long distance runners after their workouts. The procedure is to let the two groups walk slowly to a designated place after rising from bed in the morning, then with the Taijiquan group doing a set of simplified Taijiquan and the runners group running in full speed a distance of 1,600 metres. Both before and after their workouts, samples of their saliva were collected and tests were made of the contents of the immune substance, the secretive type globulin (SIgA) contained in their saliva. The result was that an increase of SIgA was found in about two thirds of Taijiquan group, while a decrease was found in about two thirds of the runners group right after the workout. It shows that exercises of different intensity will bring about good or bad influence, at least right after the workout, to the immune functions of the human body and an exercise of moderate intensity like Taijiquan will bring about a good influence. This is another proof offered by modern scientific analysis of the multivalent effects

of this unique and popular traditional Chinese form of mental and physical culture.

Zeng:

All that I have learned from you today is most interesting and enlightening. Now is there anything else that you would consider of particular importance for me to observe?

Wu:

Well, yes. Though you are much younger than I, you are now already sixty-six, and as enthusiastic as you are, it is all the more necessary to be aware of over training. Anything done in harmony with the law of nature is liable to bring you good results, and aging is a natural law. Don't take yourself as still young when you are already old, or are becoming older. In my own case, I used to train not less than three hours a day when a youth. The whole program was very strenuous, including "keeping pile-stance"(holding a fixed position for a number of minutes, a sort of isometric training) in several different stances; kicking a foot high up forward, touching the forehead with the toe and kicking a foot high up backward, touching the back of head with the heel; doing a set of Taijiquan under a kind of long rectangular table only a few inches higher than a dining table, so as to make sure that I was taking a very tiring low stance, etc. Then about 2 hours during my middle age. After sixty, about one hour and a half. Over seventy, about an hour. Over eighty, less than an hour. Over ninety, about 30 minutes. Now I do only about 15 minutes early every morning and sometimes another 15 minutes before going to bed, and I have kept myself all the time fit and healthy.

The second thing I want you to keep in mind is that the healthy and strong body one has built up through long years of Taijiquan practice or any other sports activity is not one that can stand limitless abuses. Over-eating, over-smoking, over-drinking, over-indulgence in sex, and working beyond a certain limit will surely ruin the mind and the body.

Finally, I hope you will not limit the application of the basic principles of the art to your daily Taijiquan only. For instance if, while walking, you

remember to stick up the top of your head lightly, loosen up your hip joints and raise the knees, you will instantly feel spirited and nimble. If something vexes you, you can throw it off by a few minutes of deep breathing, slowly and evenly, and, by shutting off all disturbing thoughts, as you do in the "Preparation Form". Then follow with an actual round of Taijiquan, or just picturing it in your mind. When you are at a scenic spot or in a place full of sunshine, fresh air and fresh food, don't hesitate to take these good things into your body and form a deep impression of them in your mind, to be recalled with joy afterwards, by doing a set of Taijiquan on the spot. That will certainly help you attain super health and longevity.

Zeng:

Thank you ever so much for your valuable and detailed advice. As the old saying goes: "I profit more from one consultation with you than from ten years of reading." I wish you a long, long life and I hope that more and more Taijiquan enthusiasts will learn of your teachings and be benefitted by them.

Chinese used in Tai Chi Chuan By Dr. E.C.Lee

For better understanding and to be a better player in Tai Chi Chuan, every Tai Chi player should know more about Chinese and the Chinese culture as well.

Have you ever read some Tai Chi Chuan books and wondered why conflicts existed among them? You might have read a translation about Tai Chi Chuan and had difficulty understanding it. You may wonder if the translations are really what the Chinese meant. Sometimes you wish you could read Chinese by yourself.

This course, Chinese used in Tai Chi Chuan, is intended to let the players relate the Tai Chi Chuan with Chinese culture. Early in the morning, we will play and discuss the 88 Yang's Tai Chi Chuan. A class will be given to complete the day. It will cover many interesting subjects such as: Chinese history, geography, Chinese language, (read and write), dialects, on translation, martial arts and Wushu, Tai Chi and Tai Chi Chuan, Taoist philosophy, and other Chinese philosophies if time is available. Since time is short, we may not get into great detail in each subject. Please feel free to ask questions.

The following subjects will be discussed:

1. Evolution of the martial arts and the historical events.
2. Geography (such as the weather) affects culture, major cities, rivers and mountains.
3. " Chinese is of single syllable in pronunciation and in multiple meanings when combined with other words".
4. Old Chinese without punctuation and modern Chinese mixed with dialect.
e.g. Introduction of Pa Dua Theory written by Sun Lu Tang and the name of Grasp Birds' Tail.
5. " There are no perfect translations due to different cultures".
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