



White Crane Martial Arts

A Brief History of Tai Chi

Tai Chi is an ancient Chinese martial art that also has many health and energy development aspects. One legend is the art was developed by Chang San Feng around 1200 AD after he watched a crane fight a snake. From that he developed a self-defense style based on animal inspired movements.

The first recorded mention of Tai Chi comes from the Chen village in the Henan province of China. The patriarch of the family, Chen Wang Ting, returned from a war with a new style of self-defense. He taught it only to his sons, and so kept it within the family for several generations.

In the early 1800's Yang Lu Chan went to the Chen village to learn the style. Not being related, he was not allowed to learn. Again the story moves into legend. One version is that he played a deaf mute while working in the Chen household. He would observe their daily practice and then practice on his own at night. When he was discovered practicing he had to face the Chen's in combat. After defeating all of them, he was allowed to stay and train. Another version is similar except that once when the Chen men were gone the village was attacked. Yang defeated the attackers and as a way to reward him, the Chen's allowed him to study openly. Whatever the true story may be, Yang did learn the Chen style, adapted it into his own style, and taught Yang style Tai Chi widely in China. Because of this, the Yang style is one of the most commonly practiced styles. Yang's form has 108 movements and is performed slower than some other styles.

The next player in the story was Cheng Man Ching. In 1932 when he was suffering from tuberculosis, he began to study Tai Chi. His health began to improve and he started to teach Tai Chi to others. Later he developed a shorter easier version to teach the Chinese military. His shorter form only has 37 movements and is still taught to beginning students.

Forms

Most styles of martial arts have a standardized order to practice basic movements. These are called forms and Tai Chi is no exception. At White Crane we do three different forms. The first form is a warm-up form learned by Colonel "Tse" as a child in the imperial court of China. The second form is the Yang short form as developed by Cheng Man Ching. Finally the Yang long form developed by Yang Lu Chan will be taught in an intermediate class.

Rank

There is no rank system or belts in traditional Tai Chi classes. White Crane classes are organized as needed for beginning, intermediate and advanced level students. A student's level is determined by time in class, competency, and the student's wishes. If a student wishes to be moved, the student and instructor will meet to determine the best placement.

Sparring

Sparring in Tai Chi takes two forms—push hands and free spar. Those are introduced in the intermediate class and continued in the advanced class.

Dress

Tai Chi is about relaxing and so what you wear should be loose and allow you to move freely. Sweat pants, T-shirts, and tennis shoes are the most common dress, but more traditional uniforms and shoes can be purchased.

The 10 Tai Chi Essentials (by Yang Cheng Fu)

1. Keep head erect (as if suspended by a thread from the heavens).
2. Hollow the chest (relax your chest-not military style with shoulders thrown back).
3. Relax the waist (the waist should turn, leading the movements).
4. Differentiate between substantial and insubstantial (be aware of which leg is weighted).
5. Sink the shoulders and elbows (relax-not military style).
6. Use you mind rather than your muscles.
7. Coordinate upper and lower body (don't isolate parts-the body moves as a unit).
8. Coordinate outer and inner parts (the mind guides the body, is involved in movement).
9. Continuous and flowing motion (flow like water).
10. Tranquility and peace in movement (mind and body working together to bring calm to the soul).

Other Key Concepts

1. Be sure to shift your weight between legs/feet as you move.
2. Keep your weight centered between your feet—don't extend yourself beyond your front toes, back heel or outsides of your feet.
3. Do not lock your joints---knees, elbows, wrists, etc.
4. Do not over-extend movements—only move 70-80% of potential.
5. Nothing should hurt when doing Tai Chi. This is not to say that muscles might not be sore from new exercises, but if you experience a sharp pain stop immediately and determine the cause.
6. Breathe deeply, full abdominal breaths.
7. Tai Chi is not a competition against anyone. Your stepping and movements are determined by your abilities, not what others in the class are doing.
8. Once you start a form, be in continuous motion to the end.
9. Your movements should resemble seawater swirling plant life in a tidal pool, or waves of grasses in a shifting breeze.
10. Regular practice is required to fully experience the benefits of Tai Chi. Try to set aside at least 10 minutes a day for as many days as possible to work. Early morning and/or just before bed are usually the best times.
11. Do what you know and don't become frustrated with what you don't. All things take time to learn and grow.
12. Look at the long term. Some benefits will come quickly, but the greatest impact will be over the long term.
13. Smile and enjoy the movement.

Smile and enjoy life.