Tai Chi in Pain Medicine

Joseph F. Audette

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Summary

Tai Chi Chuan (TCC) was developed many centuries ago as one of many different styles of Chinese martial arts and continues to be enjoyed in a form true to its beginnings throughout the world. The name is derived from the Chinese characters that mean “The Great Ultimate,” indicating the high historic regard that exists for this physical art. On a philosophical level, the principles of TCC are founded on the teachings of Taoism and the writings of Lao Tzu (770–221 B.C.E.). The central method of achieving tranquility was to align oneself with the Tao, a term which has been translated as “the way” or “the path.” These philosophical roots point to the fact that Tai Chi practice places great emphasis on training both the mind and the body to reach spiritual unity. In this chapter, TCC will be introduced as a therapeutic exercise rather than a martial art. Information about the history and philosophy of TCC will also be provided with a detailed review of the scientific literature, particularly for pain management. Finally, two case examples of the practical application of TCC for painful conditions will be given.

Key Words: Tai Chi, Qi Gong, pain, arthritis, elderly, balance, heart rate variability

1. INTRODUCTION

There is growing understanding both among patients and healthcare practitioners that the modern biomedical healthcare model is not equally effective for all types and stages of illness. The tremendous advancements in medical technology over the last 60 years have not been as helpful as we would like in treating individuals with chronic disease, especially those with persistently painful conditions. As a result, many in the healthcare community have looked to the medical wisdom of our historic past to find alternative solutions to modern problems, especially in the area of health promotion, disease prevention, and pain management. A particularly rich area of ancient knowledge
can be found by exploring the health value of movement therapies. These exercises offer great potential for informing new therapies in the rehabilitation and pain arena for the treatment of a variety of chronic conditions.

There are a number of Eastern movement practices that have gained popularity in the West. These include Tai Chi, Qigong, and Yoga. Although each of these practices has a distinct origin, the current focus of research and general use is to apply these movements to the development of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well being, as well as disease prevention and treatment. Unique among these, Tai Chi Chuan (TCC) had clear martial beginnings and was considered an effective means of self-defense. In the last 50 to 70 years, however, the primary application of this ancient art has been directed at health promotion.

2. HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

Tai Chi Chuan (TCC) (also written as Tai Chi, Tai Chi Quan, Taijiquan, or T’ai Chi) developed many centuries ago as one of many different styles of Chinese martial arts and continues to be enjoyed in a form true to its beginnings throughout the world. The name is derived from the Chinese characters that mean “The Great Ultimate” (Figure 1). This refers to the dynamic and fundamental balance between opposites in the universe (Yin or unity balanced with Yang or change).

Taoist theories of health and longevity are based in part on the theory that exercise practices such as TCC that can enhance the flow and balance of Qi or vital energy. Disease is believed to occur when the Qi is out of balance or blocked, and TCC is one of a number of techniques used to help restore this dynamic, energetic equilibrium in the body. Even today, the practice of TCC is an important feature of the Chinese approach to health maintenance and disease prevention and the practice continues to be taught to students in traditional Chinese medical schools. As anyone who has visited

Fig. 1. The Great Ultimate.