



Ezy Tai Chi: a simpler practice for seniors

Practicing tai chi provides older adults with benefits in mental and physical health, mobility, and strength. This modified version offers a programming alternative

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This article provides an overview of an 8-form tai chi. This simpler practice was modified from the contemporary 24-form version by Fuzhong Li, one of the authors of this article. The work presented in this article is based on the authors' practical and research experiences in tai chi covering two decades, and from discussions with tai chi masters, specialists and practitioners in China and the United States.

As a form of exercise, tai chi increasingly appeals to the growing proportion of older adults that looks for alternative and convenient ways to exercise for health. Originally developed for martial arts purposes in China more than 300 hundred years ago,¹ this practice has been used as a traditional exercise to improve fitness, health and longevity² for individuals of all ages. Tai chi's low-to-moderate intensity and beneficial effects on strength, flexibility, breathing and balance^{3,4,5} make it especially attractive to mature adults.

Basically, tai chi is a series of individual movements, or forms, linked together to flow smoothly from one to another. When performed with continuity, these movements involve body and trunk rotation, flexion and extension of the hips and knees, weight shifting, postural control and alignment, with and without arm coordination.⁶

Some synchronization of diaphragmatic breathing and mental concentration is also integral to tai chi. This element is purported to promote harmony between body and mind. So tai chi involves training the mind, as well as the body, which is why it is often referred to as "moving meditation."⁷

In addition to the physical movement and meditational features of its practice, tai chi is intended to cultivate *qi* (pronounced *chee*), an internal force or vital energy—the nature of which is not fully understood. According to Chinese medical theory, tai chi movements allow *qi* to circulate throughout the body via channels or meridians. These *energy pathways* connect organs, joints and muscle groups. Along meridians are points used in tai chi as foci to direct

the flow of *qi* and control body balance mechanisms through the constant interplay of *yin* and *yang*.

Yin (inactivity) and *yang (activity)* are opposite, but complementary, forces of nature that need to be in balance for optimal functioning (e.g. male/female, static/moving, active/passive, tension/relaxation, or forceful/yielding). The dynamic relationship between *yin* and *yang* underpins all movements of tai chi.

Shifting body weight creates a continuous reciprocity of *yin* and *yang* states in tai chi. The resulting equilibrium of *yin* and *yang* through the integration of *qi* and controlled movement is said to sustain health, prolong life and bring about emotional healing.⁸

Shown to produce health benefits, tai chi is gaining popularity among older adults.⁹ Yet few tai chi programs have been modified to suit the physical and mental needs of this population—many of whom face the challenge of declining physical function. In addition, little attention has been paid to issues associated with facilitating the delivery and instruction of tai chi to populations of most need. To address these problems, scientists from the Oregon Research Institute in Eugene, Oregon, have introduced a simpler version: Ezy Tai Chi.

Simplified tai chi

Several styles of tai chi exist, some historic/traditional and some of more recent origin. Today, the *yang* style is probably the most popular.^{6,10} Ezy Tai Chi reduces the number and complexity of the 24-form *yang* style¹ of tai chi to just eight forms. These movements contain all the natural characteristics of the conventional 24-form, but with the advantages of a less complex movement sequence for ease of performance and recall. (See Table 1 on page 24 for the names of these movements.)

Ezy Tai Chi consists of six postures plus commencing and closing forms, all derived from the contemporary 24-form

simplified tai chi.¹¹ This 8-form version follows a gradual, simple-to-difficult progression. The movement execution begins with upper-body motion (involving arm, shoulder and trunk movements) and minimal demands for postural control, then moves to forms with increasing postural demands involving whole body-limb coordination. (To view illustrated Ezy Tai Chi instructions, go to page 22.)

As in all forms of tai chi, breathing is important and linked closely with the movements (e.g. inhaling when raising arms and exhaling when pressing arms down). This sinks the *qi* to the *dantian* (pronounced *dan-tee-ann*), or energy center located in the lower abdomen slightly below the navel. Breathing during Ezy Tai Chi should be natural, rhythmic and full, but not forced. Breaths should originate from the diaphragm, and the inhale-exhale rhythm should comfortably coordinate with the flow of movements.

Although preferably done while standing, *Ezy Tai Chi can also be performed in a chair* by participants who have a problem with standing or who depend on ambulatory supports (i.e. walker, cane or wheelchair). When performed in a seated position, these movements work the full range of motion for the arms, shoulders and torso. For example, individuals with standing difficulty may still benefit by engaging in upper-body-based movements such as *curving back arms*, which focuses on upper limbs and trunk rotation, and even lower-limb movements, such as lifting legs (similar to that of *standing on one leg*), which works on hip flexion and stable postural alignment.

The Ezy Tai Chi sequence can take less than three minutes to complete, depending on an individual's mobility level. Compared to the 10-form,¹² 20-form,¹³ and the contemporary 24-form tai chi, this modified version lends itself to being adapted to underserved populations, such as those who are

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physically or functionally challenged and for whom a lengthy learning period would be problematic. The fewer, simpler movements and shorter sequence likely make the learning experience less demanding on older adults—and potentially more enjoyable.

From a teaching standpoint, instructors of Ezy Tai Chi avoid the need to simplify the lengthy routines of many other tai chi forms. Movements from this modified version can be taught and performed as single movements, or in combination (e.g. two or three movements), before participants practice them as a complete routine. As a result, instructors can focus more on teaching basic fundamental movements, including footwork, body position, eye-hand coordination, and breathing.

All these characteristics of Ezy Tai Chi are likely to encourage learners to persist in practicing these movements and enhance their commitment to tai chi as a lifelong exercise.

Ezy Tai Chi session format

A general plan for an in-class practice session of Ezy Tai Chi may involve the following components: a 10-minute warm-up, 25–30 minutes of practicing movements/postures, and a 5-minute cool down. Also recommended, five-minute breaks between practice sessions allow learners to rest and interact socially.

After their warm-up, participants in a preliminary session can practice single *static* positions. This involves holding each single movement listed in Table 1 (see page 24) for a period of 5–10 seconds. The static movement practice has the lowest attention demand for postural control and fewest between-limbs movement coordination tasks for beginners, making it easier to perform. This static practice also enables the participants to get the idea of setting a correct posture and a sense of body

alignment and weight centering. Following this preliminary session, participants may move onto performing each single *moving* exercise.

Moving practice increases selective attention and allows individuals to experience appropriate alignment for balance and to coordinate rotations of limb and trunk. During this element, participants perform 8–10 repetitions of each movement under a slow, self-controlled speed. After some successful initial practice of these static and moving movements, participants should be ready to start linking each of the Ezy Tai Chi postures in a sequential, continuous manner. Each daily session should consist of a minimum of five sets of Ezy Tai Chi, along with repeated practice of each movement.

Participants may practice tai chi in a high, medium or low stance, depending on their age, physical limitations and training purposes.^{11,14} With a low stance, the body is in a semi-squatting position, with knees bent almost 90°, which places most demand upon the large muscle groups of the thighs. With a high stance, the knees are bent at an angle of only slight discomfort. For older adults, a high stance is recommended for two reasons:

- It does not impose extraneous body weight on the lower extremities; and
- It facilitates both anatomic alignment and flexibility for posture maneuvers.

In contrast, the low stance imposes more body weight on the legs—the knees, in particular. This stance is also physically demanding on the quadriceps for older adults and others who have weak lower-limb muscle strength and/or physical impairment (e.g. hip replacement).

Ezy Tai Chi: health benefits

The 8-form Ezy Tai Chi provides training likely to improve muscle

strength through static and moving exercises, while addressing the need to control balance over a dynamically changing base of support. This practice also improves balance by involving interlimb coordination and coordination between lower-extremity and upper-body movements. In addition, the training may increase the balance response repertoires older adults can use in balance-challenging situations.

To provide preliminary evidence of the efficacy and utility of Ezy Tai Chi, scientists at the Oregon Research Institute analyzed data from a subset of individuals in a tai chi intervention trial. For this study, the 8-form Ezy Tai Chi was implemented and compared to a conventional low-stress stretching exercise program.¹⁵ Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions. These subjects engaged in an exercise intervention three times per week for three months.

Compared to the low-stress exercise control group, tai chi participants experienced significant improvements on the self-reported mental and physical health measures, activities of daily living (IADLs), and in the physical performance measures of one-leg balance, 50-foot walking speed, and time to rise from a chair. Although preliminary, these results collectively suggest Ezy Tai Chi may be potentially as effective in enhancing functional ability and health status in older individuals as the more complex 24-form version.

Specific program benefits

Ezy Tai Chi is suitable as a home-based activity for older adults or as a programming option for those health and wellness organizations that serve the mature market. As a home-based exercise program, Ezy Tai Chi allows older people to experience success and move toward achieving mastery in their own living environment. Home practice

also removes the transportation/travel barrier of coming to a class and allows participants to work on routines in their own time, which potentially increases exercise adherence. But older adults should first take a class from a suitably qualified and experienced instructor, so they are introduced to the initial modeling and understanding of the pace, flow and transitions between movements.

The modified 8-form tai chi can be performed at any time or place after initial training, and it requires no special equipment, clothing or footwear. Instructors can modify this activity to accommodate the functional level of older adults, including individuals in wheelchairs, those with restricted levels of physical activity, and those who may be recovering from injury or previously debilitating illnesses. In fact, modifications can be made (in whole or in part) to fit a variety of rehabilitative endeavors—from assisting an individual who has experienced a cerebrovascular accident (CVA) or traumatic brain injury, to working with someone with an orthopedic impairment or cardiorespiratory decline.

Most of the tai chi postures provide enough flexibility to allow individuals to perform to their potential. And the simplified 8-form version is appropriate for older adults whose motor abilities may be compromised or who find existing tai chi forms or similar modes of exercise difficult or unappealing.

Tai chi enhances both the physical and mental health of people who practice it. Ezy Tai Chi's easy-to-perform, soft and fluid movements make this simplified form an ideal programming option for older adults, regardless of their exercise experience.

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Resources

A video clip of the full set of Ezy Tai Chi forms can be viewed through the authors' website at <http://healthyaging.ori.org/easytaichi/ezaichi.html>. This clip shows these movements being performed in both standing and sitting positions. A training manual is also available on this website. To download this link and view the clip, you will need considerable broadband width.

A video of Ezy 8-Form Tai Chi (VHS or DVD format) will soon be available from Oregon Research Institute, c/o Ms. K. Bangle, 1715 Franklin Boulevard, Eugene OR 97403. The cost is US\$15. Checks only, please. Price includes shipping and handling.

prevention in refereed journals. He can be reached by phone at 541-484-2123, or by email at johnf@ori.org.

Fuzhong Li, Ph.D., is a research scientist at the Oregon Research Institute in Eugene, Oregon. A native of China, he has been researching the therapeutic benefits of low to moderate impact physical exercise such as tai chi for more than two decades. He is the principal investigator of several randomized controlled trials investigating the influences of tai chi on various aspects of the health of older adults. He can be reached by phone at 541-484-2123, or by email at fuzhongl@ori.org.

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Ezy Tai Chi: principles and practice

The core part of tai chi training or practice follows a set of 10 essential principles:¹

1. Keep the head still and upright.
2. Focus eyes in direction of primary limb.
3. Close the mouth (tongue can touch the roof of the mouth).
4. Body is centered and upright.
5. Arch the chest and slightly round the back.
6. Loosen tension around the waist and hips.
7. Sink the shoulders and drop the elbows.
8. Extend the fingers and settle the wrists.
9. Distinguish *insubstantial* from *substantial* (explained below).
10. Upper and lower body follow each other.

Based on these 10 essentials, the following training guidelines may be followed:

Complete body and mind relaxation: tai chi practice requires the practitioner to eliminate all other thoughts and to focus on movement, breathing, relaxation, and distribution of weight.

Balancing weight: tai chi emphasizes alternating one's balance between a weight-bearing (*solid*) leg and a non-weight-bearing (*hollow*) leg. In tai chi, this is referred to as the *substantial* and *insubstantial* of weight-balancing.

Breathing: breathing must be smooth, regular and coordinated with the movements.

Movement continuity/flow: all movements are done slowly with no pauses or breaks; that is, the postures should flow evenly from start to finish. In essence, all movements are slow, continuous, even, circular and smooth. There should be no feeling of tightness or stiffness in the muscles or joints.

The eight forms

Form 1: Commencing form

Pre-commencing stance: feet together with both knees unlocked, arms at sides, facing forward.

Step 1: with a slight weight-shift to the right, left foot takes a half-step to the left, so that the feet are at shoulder's width apart. Toes point forward and arms hang naturally alongside the body.

Step 2: slowly raise both arms up, elbows unlocked, to shoulder level, keeping the palms facing downward.

Transitional movement: slightly lower both arms while bending legs.

Form 2: Repulse Monkey

Step 1: from the transitional movement described above, move the right hand downward in a semicircle to shoulder level with the palm facing up. The left arm remains in position, but the left wrist now twists slightly so that the palm faces up. Shift the body weight gradually to the left foot as the arm movements are being executed.

Step 2: Now push the right hand forward with the body weight simultaneously shifting to the right side while the left arm lowers in a downward arch, passing the left hip and ending at the shoulder level.

Repeat these movements twice on each side.

Transitional movement: the Repulse Monkey form finishes up in a ball-holding position with hands on the right side.

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The

Form 1:



Commencing form

Form 2:



Repulse Monkey (right)



Repulse Monkey (left)

Form 3: (left)



Transition to Form 3



Grasp Peacock's Tail (Ward-off; left)



Grasp Peacock's Tail (Pull back; left)



Grasp Peacock's Tail (Press; left)



Grasp Peacock's Tail (Push; left)

e i g h t f o r m s

Form 3: (right)



Transition to the right



Grasp Peacock's Tail (Ward-off; right)



Move Hands like Moving Clouds (left)

Form 7:



Transition to Form 7



Brush Knees and Twist Steps (left)



Grasp Peacock's Tail (Pull back; right)



Grasp Peacock's Tail (Press; right)



Transition to Form 5



Fair Lady Works at Shuttles (left)



Transition to the right



Brush Knees and Twist Steps (right)



Grasp Peacock's Tail (Push; right)



Transition to the right



Fair Lady Works at Shuttles (right)



Closing form



Closing form

Form 8:

Form 4:



Transition to Form 4



Transition to Form 4

Form 6:



Transition to Form 6



Golden Cock Stands on One Leg (left)



Closing form



Transition to Form 4



Move Hands like Moving Clouds (left)



Golden Cock Stands on One Leg (right)

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Form 3: Grasp Peacock's Tail

This form consists of four parts:

1. Ward-off;
2. Pull back;
3. Press; and
4. Push.

Step 1: from the above ball-holding position, turn the left foot away from the midline of the body (towards left side), then turn the upper body 45° to the left. Move the left hand forward arriving at eye level while pressing the right hand down obliquely to the side of the right hip with the palm facing downward. This completes Ward-off.

Step 2: turn torso slightly to left while moving the right hand forward to *almost meet* the extended left hand. Then, pull both hands down in a curve past the abdomen, until right hand is extended sideways at shoulder level with the elbow bend upward; the right hand then joins the left hand in front of the chest. This completes Pull back.

Step 3: with the weight seated on the (rear) right foot, pull both hands downward to abdomen, then push forward both hands with shoulders relaxed and elbows dropped. This completes Press.

Step 4: at the end of Press, extend both hands and palms outward and forward. This completes Push.

Repeat all four mini-forms on the right side.

Form 4: Move Hands like Moving Clouds (left side only)

Step 1: from the end of Form 3, move both arms (45°) to the left side and simultaneously shift the weight into the left leg. Then, move right hand in an arc past one's face with palm facing the body, while left hand moves downward.

Step 2: turn torso gradually to the left with the weight shifting onto left leg. Simultaneously, move left hand upward with the palm facing the body, to pass the left shoulder. The right hand twists and starts its swing downward (palm faces the body), following the direction of the left hand. The right leg joins the left leg.

Repeat this movement three times.

Transitional movement: the Move Hands like Moving Clouds form finishes with a ball-holding position of hands on the right side (near the hip).

Form 5: Fair Lady Works at Shuttles

Step 1: from the end of Form 4, step out (45° to the left) with left foot. Left hand moves upward to block (an opponent) while the right hand and right palm pushes forward and outward.

Step 2: Now drop the right hand. Step out (45° to the right). Right hand moves upward to block (an opponent) while the left hand pushes forward and outward.

Table 1.
Names of Ezy Tai Chi forms

Form	Movement direction/number of repetitions
1. Commencing form	Both hands rise to shoulder level
2. Curving back arms (Repulse Monkey)	Right, left; two times each side
3. Stepping side and moving arms (Grasp Peacock's Tail: Ward-off, Pull back, Press, Push)	To the left, then to the right
4. Moving hands (Move Hands Like Moving Clouds)	Left side leads; three times
5. Diagonal strides (Fair Lady Works at Shuttles)	Left, then right
6. Standing on one leg (Golden Cock Stands on One Leg)	Right, then left
7. Stepping and pushing (Brush Knees and Twist Steps)	Left, then right
8. Closing form	Both hands fall to the side, left leg drawn to the right

Note. Interim transitional movements are not included. Names in the parentheses are the standard tai chi names.

Research on tai chi

The therapeutic value of tai chi to the health and well-being of older adults is well documented.^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7} Studies using various populations have shown that tai chi training is positively associated with the following:

- Postural/balance and gait stability;^{8,4,9}
- Reductions in falls risk and fear of falling;¹⁰
- Improved cardiovascular function;^{11,10,12}
- Muscular strength of knee extensors;¹³
- Physical functioning;^{14,15}
- Reductions in tension/stress;^{16,17}
- Enhanced movement confidence/arthritis self-efficacy;^{18,19}
- Physical self-esteem;²⁰ and
- Sense of overall well-being.^{21,22}

Tai chi has been recommended as an important part of exercise programs to promote balance, prevent falls, and reduce falls and fear of falling.^{23,24,10,6} For example, a panel comprising representatives from the American Geriatrics Society, British Geriatrics Society and American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons²⁵ recommended that tai chi be considered for balance training as a preventive strategy to reduce falls among the elderly.

Collectively, the existing research provides substantial evidence of the multidimensional health benefits of tai chi, but questions still remain regarding optimal levels of tai chi frequency, duration and intensity.⁶

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Form 6: Golden Cock Stands on One Leg (left and right)

Step 1: drop the left and right hands and slowly move one's weight to the left foot. Move the right arm upward and lift the right leg (as if it were on a string). The left arm is simply at the side of the left thigh.

Step 2: return to a standing position with feet shoulder width apart, weight evenly balanced. Repeat Steps 1 and 2 on the right foot.

Form 7: Brush Knees and Twist Steps

Step 1: turn torso slowly to the right as right hand circles upward and outward about ear level. Arm is slightly bent and palm faces upward (as if holding a violin). Left hand follows the direction of the right hand.

Step 2: turn torso to the left as left foot takes a step in a forward direction. At the same time, left hand pushes forward passing knee, while right hand pushes forward, palm facing away from body. Repeat this for the right knee.

Form 8: Closing form

Step 1: from the end of Form 7, bring left foot forward to place it next to the right foot with knees slightly bent (unlocked). At the same time, move both hands upward to face level (palms facing body), ending with both hands crossed in front of chest.

Step 2: straighten both legs. Turn wrists forward, so that palms now face downward; lower both hands gradually alongside the body. Look straight ahead.

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