

Health

Maintaining the Temple

● TAI CHI ● PRABHDEV SINGH ON GOLF



It's 170 years old but it could well be your prescription for the future. Tai Chi Chuan is backed by scientific research, and promises a multitude of benefits.

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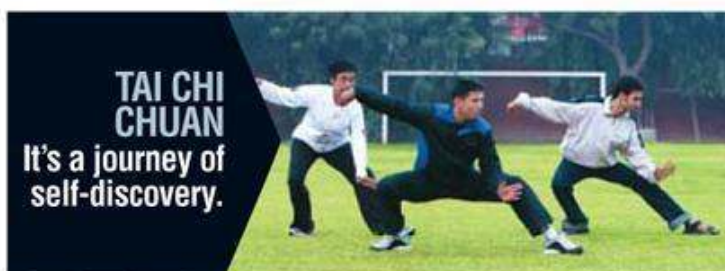
MOVING MEDITATION

Sweating it out: Reebok Master Trainer Nisha Varma (L) practising Tai Chi

It's 6 a.m. on a chilly Saturday morning and Reebok Master Trainer Nisha Varma is busy sweating it out in a South Delhi school with a bunch of students. But this is a workout class with a difference. It's not about lat pull-downs and bicep curls. Varma's practising

Tai Chi Chuan, the meditative Chinese martial art form. She's been into weight training and yoga for 20 years now, but it's Tai Chi that she really lives for. It's the only reason she's up and about today.

"I suffered an ankle injury in 2006, and was in



TAI CHI CHUAN
It's a journey of self-discovery.



tremendous pain for a long time," says Varma. "Though I took to aerobics and working out soon thereafter, my sense of balance went for a toss and I had to bid adieu to cardiovascular training and weights. I tried physiotherapy, and was under a lot of medication, but nothing really helped. I took to Tai Chi around two years ago, and have regained about 80 per cent of my balance now. The benefits of this multi-pronged workout are immense."

The three words—Tai Chi Chuan—echo her sentiments. "When translated, the Chinese characters for Tai Chi Chuan mean the supreme ultimate force," explains Varma's teacher, Master Sifu George Thomas, President and Founder of Tai Chi Academy India. A six degree black belt in karate and a national referee, Thomas was into hardcore martial arts till he discovered this form of Tai Chi in 1983. "It was founded by Yang Lu Chuan about 170 years ago and today, it's the most popular of all Tai Chi forms."

For Thomas, it began one day at a park in Singapore. "I was on holiday and I saw people practising Tai Chi in a neighbourhood park and it just blew me away," he says. "Tai Chi is popularly described as moving meditation, as the movements are slow, evenly paced and like a flowing river, a far cry from those rough and tough karate moves that I had come to master. You could call it Chinese yoga, as it's a combination of physical exercise, breathing techniques and meditation—very different from other martial art forms, which are all self-defence."

The classes begin with brief warm-ups, which essentially involve basic squats and rotations. But they soon progress to what looks like slow motion dance. There's no heaving and puffing and punching. The exercises are

meditative. Like the tree meditation, where the group stands with their arms wide open as though locked in an open embrace. "The meditative exercises use a lot of imagery and help in developing coordination and building stillness," says Varma. It sounds simple, but the execution is actually quite difficult, even painful.

"As opposed to yoga, which is all about flexion and extension of the spine, Tai Chi exercises are always focussed on a standing position, and require a heightened sense of muscular coordination," says Varma. "The breathing remains even, and you don't get a perceivable cardio effect, as the heart rate doesn't go up. Yet, a person can burn as many 280-300 calories in a day, while practising Tai Chi."

But, fat burning isn't the only benefit—far from it. "The exercises are excellent for stress-related disorders like hypertension, backaches, asthma and arthritis, and also for improving one's immunity level," says Varma. "There's a lot of emphasis on breathing techniques that help people with respiratory troubles and prevent a lot of chronic disorders."

There's plenty of solid scientific evidence to back them up. New research has indicated that people suffering from asthma may be able to better control their breathing with some training in Tai Chi. Previous studies point to its benefits with regards to cardiovascular fitness, sleep deprivation and osteoporosis.

A regular Tai Chi class cuts across all age groups and ailments and there's a lot of emphasis on individual attention. There's no sense of competition or urgency. And people appear to be working out at their own pace. "Give yourself two months," says Thomas. "You'll be amazed. It's a journey of self-discovery."

For information about the classes in your city, check out: www.taichiacademyindia.com

