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METRO WORKOUT

A perfect balance

Tai Chi is indeed moving meditation, finds Nandini Nair

Photo: Shiv Kumar

Slow and steady Nisha Varma takes a class through some Tai chi moves

The last light is slipping away as I rush into a South Delhi school. I ask the guard "Tai Chi"? And with a meaningful smile he gives me directions. I soon find myself in the midst of six Tai Chi practitioners. Unlike most exercises, which involve a lot of heaving and huffing, Tai Chi is like a dance in slow motion.

Nisha Varma, a Reebok master trainer and instructor at the Tai Chi Academy of India, initiates me. This academy practises the Tai Chi Chuan, said to have been created by Chinese master Yang Lu Chan about 170 years ago. This is a soft Tai Chi, meant as a complete workout for body and mind. It's unlike the hard Tai Chi, which is essentially for self defence. George Thomas is the master of the Tai Chi Academy, having also started various Tai Chi schools around India. He describes this martial form as "'Moving Meditation'.

because the movements are slow and evenly paced, like a flowing river."

The class begins with brief warm-up exercises, which essentially involve basic squats and rotations. I realise this is not a conventional workout, as soon as the warm-up exercises are finished. As next is a minute of tree meditation. Here one stands with arms in an open embrace and eyes shut. One has to visualise that one is hugging a tree. Varma explains, "Tai Chi has a lot of imagery in it. Trees energise you like nothing else. It helps to give you a sense of stillness and yet movement."

Tai Chi Chuan has two forms. One is a set of 28 movements and the longer one is a set of 85 movements. With Tai Chi, the exercises look easier than they are. The single whip exercise requires the right leg be placed in front and bent at a 45 degree angle. With palms outstretched the hands are placed in the front of the body. This is followed by a slow pivot on the heels. It might sound simple but the execution is complex and even painful. The instructions are plentiful. Neck and shoulder must be relaxed. The tongue should touch the roof of the mouth. And the gaze should be directly ahead.

Master George Thomas

Varma explains that these exercises help both mentally and physically. They give joint stability, muscular strength and toughen the core muscles. Like yoga and vipassana, which focus on inner well-being, Tai Chi also helps in the centering of the self and stilling the mind. This is one workout that leaves one tired yet strangely rested at the end.

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