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## Mind & Muscle: Martial Arts Brings Balance to Emotional & Physical Development



By Edward Niam

Photo by Dale Dong

Envision a studio alive with the kinetic energy of kicks, punches, blocks and grabs – pugilistic movements designed to defend against or subdue an attacker. Now visualize a room where members of a group sit in the lotus position with eyes half closed. They focus on slow, rhythmic lower abdominal breathing and clear the mind in an attempt to blend their Chi (vital energy) with the Great Universal. Finally, picture a public park on a sunny morning where a dedicated collection of individuals moves as one in a series of graceful dance-like movements.

What do these scenes have in common? The participants are all practicing martial arts.

The term “martial arts” generically refers to the fighting styles that originated and were developed in the Orient. It tends to elicit visions of hand-to-hand combat, elements of the myriad styles practiced throughout the world. However, removing the “martial” component allows us to view the integral element of the “art” itself.

Although the practice of martial arts requires time, discipline, effort, memorization, sacrifice and commitment, the benefits of learning the art far exceed the accomplishment of becoming a skilled fighter. A comprehensive martial arts training system not only cultivates strength, muscle development and flexibility, it promotes healthy joints and internal organs, improved circulation and increased lung capacity. While yielding grace and flexibility, it stimulates Chi and fosters a mind-body connection.

The most important element of a first-rate martial arts program is its strengthening exercises. Our body never stops creating new muscle tissue, but as we enter our middle age, we begin to lose muscle mass. Gravity tugs us downwards and exerts a crushing pressure on our skeletal system, hastening the destruction of cartilage and often bringing on the crippling effects of osteoarthritis. A good martial arts program will develop a strong muscular system and will enable us to maintain good posture, a key element to mental and physical health. In addition, it will increase bone density and counteract the thinning of our bones that occurs with age.

Another important element in martial arts is the martial movements themselves. The right movements will not only strengthen our bodies but will extend our youthful grace. During the normal aging process our bodies become stiff and less flexible, but with regular exercise deterioration is slowed and often prevented.

The third vital element in martial arts is the practice of Qi Gong, which stimulates the internal organs and improves and strengthens Chi. Qi Gong is an extensive system of breathing exercises that fuels and energizes our internal body, the most neglected part of our anatomy. Our internal organs work ceaselessly, and unhealthy conditions often go unnoticed. The simple act of practicing Qi Gong, along with maintaining good posture and building strong muscles, minimizes the collapse of our inner body.

The fourth element in martial arts involves learning and practicing the forms, or the choreographed series of movements, in a particular style of martial arts. The fifth element is applying the movements for combat situations. The hundreds of forms and thousands of movements give the mind and body a holistic and comprehensive workout as they engage actively together. With practice, repetition and focus, the mind and body – as well as the spirit – merge and move as one.

The sixth and final element of martial arts is meditation. Meditation brings balance and harmony into one's life and provides an opportunity to relax, reflect, recharge and rejuvenate. The many styles and techniques of meditation focus on lower abdominal breathing and clearing the mind. This allows us to feel and control the movement of Chi in our body. As with exercising, the experience of meditation improves with practice.

Tai Chi, the “Great Ultimate,” is the flower of the martial arts world. Slow, deliberate, relaxed and graceful movements deliver an experience like no other. Energy blends and moves with the rhythmic flow of the universe. A form of exercise appropriate for young and old alike, it is often called a moving meditation. A true union of mind, spirit and muscle, Tai Chi is the fountain of youth.

Martial arts can be practiced by anyone at any age. No equipment or special facility is necessary. Abundant martial art styles are available, so there is certain to be one that is just right for you. All you need is the will to commit yourself to improving your mental, physical and spiritual health with one flowing, mindful, balanced step at a time.



Photo by Barbara and Andrew Molocznik

*Removing the “martial” component from martial arts allows us to view the integral element of the “art” itself.*



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*Edward Niam is the founder of the Institute for Self Healing, which provides training to people of all ages to improve mental, physical and emotional health through concepts found in Tai Chi, Acupressure, Qi Gong, Meditation and Shaolin Kung Fu. The Institute for Self Healing is located at 118 West Streetsboro Road, Suite 224 in Hudson, Ohio and can be reached by calling (330) 342-0838 or by email at: [iforselfhealing@cs.com](mailto:iforselfhealing@cs.com). Visit online at: [www.instituteforselfhealing.com](http://www.instituteforselfhealing.com).*

*Edward Niam will conduct a workshop on bringing balance into your life with Tai Chi at the Fall Wellness Festival on Saturday, October 2, 2004 at Trillium Creek in Medina. This workshop will include both lecture and participation. For more information and schedules, please Go to our [home page](#), or call (216) 226-6094.*

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**Balanced Living Magazine, LLC** - 13314 Detroit Avenue Lakewood, Ohio 44107

216-226-6094 fax: 216-226-6095 [info@BalancedLivingMag.com](mailto:info@BalancedLivingMag.com)

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