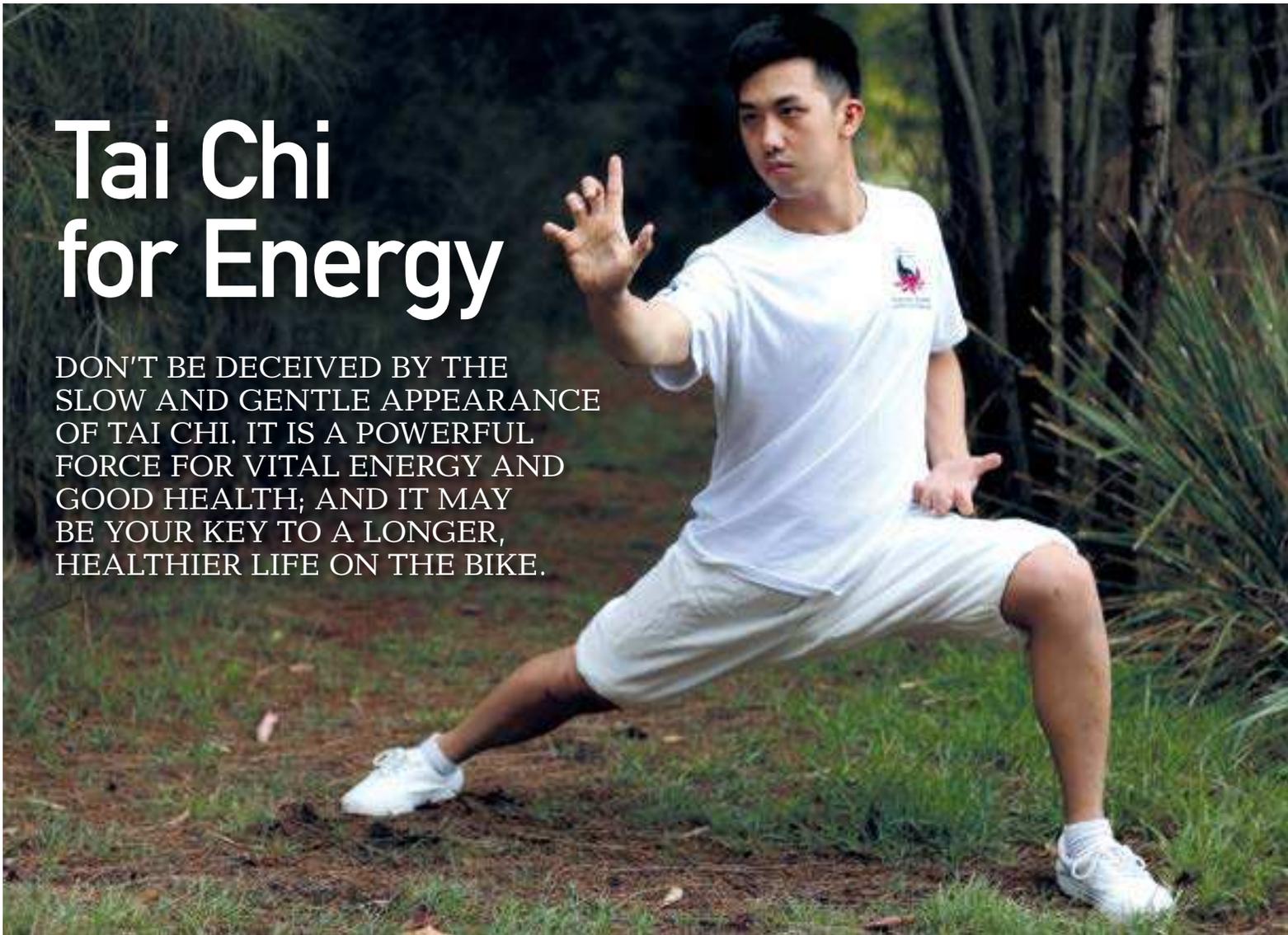


# Tai Chi for Energy

DON'T BE DECEIVED BY THE SLOW AND GENTLE APPEARANCE OF TAI CHI. IT IS A POWERFUL FORCE FOR VITAL ENERGY AND GOOD HEALTH; AND IT MAY BE YOUR KEY TO A LONGER, HEALTHIER LIFE ON THE BIKE.



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**SOPHIA AULD** is a physiotherapist, Pilates instructor and freelance writer, with 26 years' experience in the health sector.

**W**HEN DR PAUL LAM found himself flying through the air after his bike skidded, his years of tai chi training kicked into gear. "I was in the air, then I landed so beautifully," he says. "It was just instinct from all the years of my practise. I landed, absorbed the shock, and I had not one single scratch." But better crash landings are not all this ancient Chinese martial art has to offer the serious cyclist.

While the specific origins of tai chi are shrouded in legend, the most reliable sources date it back to the 16th century, and Chen Wangting, a Royal Guard of the Chen village in Henan Province.

After retirement from the military, he was drawn to the teachings of Taoism, leading him to a simple life of farming, studying and teaching martial arts. He was deeply influenced by schools of boxing, and from this he developed several tai chi routines. He went on to synthesise principles from different techniques, including deep breathing, concentrated exertion of inner force, clarity of consciousness, and martial arts exercises. Tai chi thus became a complete system of exercise, connecting the practitioner's mental concentration, deep breathing and physical actions.

Although tai chi originated

as a fighting form, over time it has evolved into a slow and controlled form of exercise that can be practiced by people of all ages. There are now at least five different tai chi styles, each with their own features, but all sharing the essential principles of mind/body integration, control of movement and breathing, mindfulness, generation of internal energy, loosening of the body and achieving serenity of mind. The ultimate goal of tai chi is to cultivate smooth and powerful flow of life energy (qi) throughout the body, resulting in harmony of the inner and outer self.

Here are five ways tai chi can help with cycling performance.

## BALANCED ENERGY

In order to optimise performance, an athlete pushes their body and mind to the limits. When limits are pushed too far, stress, injury, burnout and reduced performance can result. With its focus on mindfulness, tai chi can help with maintaining peak physical and mental health. "Athletes are able to do their best when they are relaxed and focussed," Dr Lam explains. "That's the very nature of the mindful exercise of tai chi—it helps people be serene and still alert, and not wasting energy and getting stressed."

Most athletes are familiar with this state of relaxed alertness, often termed being in "the zone" or "flow." In this state, an athlete's body can deliver the peak performance earned by training, while the mind remains calm and relaxed.

Penny, who cycles with a bunch on breakfast rides and weekly with her local club, finds tai chi an excellent complement to her rides. "I've always thought of tai chi as moving meditation," she says. "It's all to do with balance."

## BETTER BREATHING

Tai chi involves deep diaphragmatic breathing, providing a different way of training for fitness that can help increase lung capacity,

Studies have confirmed tai chi's ability to improve lung capacity in people with breathing issues. A 2013 study reported in the *European Respiratory Journal* examined 42 people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). It found that Sun style tai chi training resulted in improved endurance and peak exercise capacity in people with COPD.

Dr Lam reports many of his students have noticed improved breathing capacity after a couple of months of tai chi training. One of his students, an Olympic swimmer, experienced a significant improvement in lung capacity:

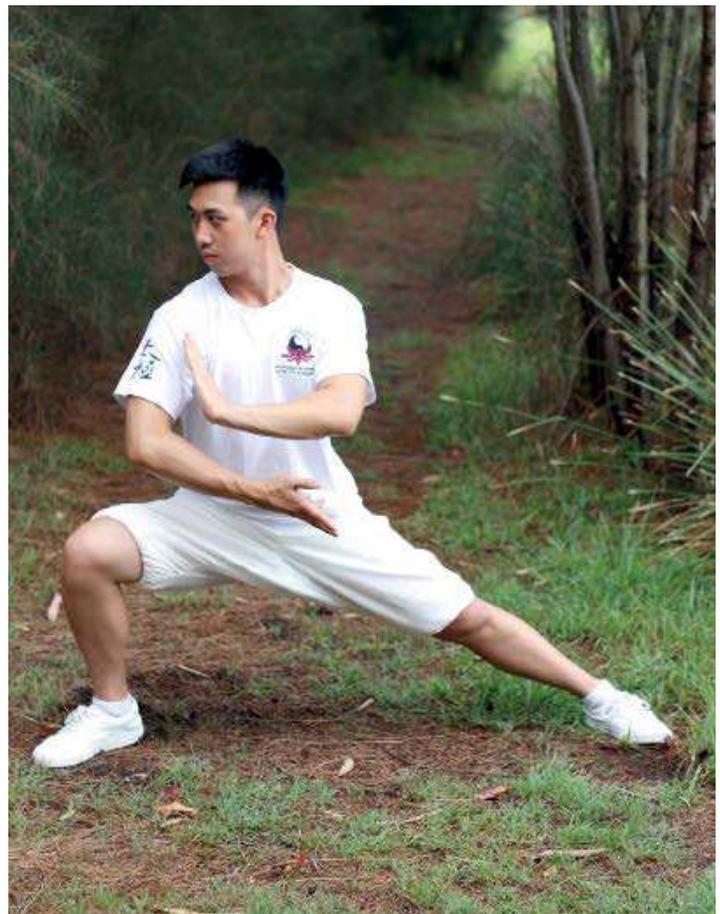


"Within a couple of months of [starting] tai chi, her breath-holding time was significantly increased." A stronger diaphragm could be the difference between tackling tough hill climbs with ease and gasping your way to the top.

## PHYSICAL PERFORMANCE

The movements of tai chi emphasise good posture and control of form. There are numerous studies supporting the use of tai chi for better posture and core muscle activation. One of these was a trial involving 160 volunteers between the ages of 18 and 70 years with a diagnosis of "persistent nonspecific low back pain." Half the participants undertook tai chi exercise consisting of 18 group sessions of 40 minutes duration over 10 weeks. The other 80 participants (control group) continued with their usual health care.

The results collected after the 10 week program indicated that there was a statistically significant improvement for 75% of the tai chi participants, with a reduction in pain and disability outcome measures for people with persistent low back pain.



**CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE PAGE:** Tai Chi has many different postures and movements many with classic oriental names, such as Dragon seeks incense, Single whip and Shoulder stroke.

Penny has noticed that tai chi has helped her maintain flexibility. "If I didn't do the tai chi I noticed how tight my muscles were in my back," she says. "It seems to loosen the body up without you realising it."

system tends to suffer. As Dr Lam explains, "When you overstretch your body, it makes sense that your immunity [goes] down." There are good studies showing the beneficial effect of tai chi on the immune system.

body's immune response to vaccinations and viruses. One of these involved a control group, and a group that practiced tai chi for five months. Both groups received an influenza vaccine prior to the study commencing. Blood

Staying well and fighting off infections is vital for athletes. Adding tai chi to your training routine could help with avoiding training lay-offs due to illness.

## [[ A stronger diaphragm could be the difference between tackling tough hill climbs with ease and gasping your way to the top. ]]

"Tai chi helps people have better posture and be more aware of where their body is," says Dr Lam. "For any athletes, like cyclists, better posture and body awareness will improve performance." He is living proof of his statements: at 68, he is more flexible than most people half his age and has a resting pulse an elite athlete would envy—all from years of tai chi practice.

### IMPROVED IMMUNITY

When athletes reach elite level, their immune

One study examined a group of people who had been practicing tai chi for at least four years, compared to a group with no tai chi training. The tai chi practitioners had significantly higher levels of T cells in their bloodstreams than the non-practitioners, and the number of active T lymphocytes increased following a session of tai chi. T cells play a vital role in immunity, including hunting out germs and cancerous cells.

Other studies have looked at tai chi and the

tests confirmed that people from the tai chi group had a better immune response to the vaccine.

Another study examined the effects of tai chi on immunity to the varicella zoster virus, which causes shingles. Study participants completed a 25 week program of either health education or tai chi. At 16 weeks, they were vaccinated against the varicella virus. The people from the tai chi group had twice the immune response to the virus than that of the control group.

### ENERGY FOR LIFE

The principle underlying all of tai chi practice is the qi, or life energy. Qi flows through the meridians. Each meridian connects the outside of the body to an internal organ. Tai chi is said to improve vital internal energy, boosting performance by making you a stronger person from within. "The qi circulates through your body and maintains the wellbeing of the body," Dr Lam says. "It pushes the blood, sends energy to all the joints, makes you perform better and be a healthier, more energised person."

Dr Lam recommends his Tai Chi for Energy program for cyclists. Designed for younger, fitter people, it combines fast and slow movements. "You can learn it quickly and get benefits very quickly," he says. 🌀



Aaron Khor, Chief Operating Officer of Australian Academy of Tai Chi and Qigong, demonstrates the Immortal Guard.

## FURTHER INFO:

[www.taichiqigonglifefourishment.com.au](http://www.taichiqigonglifefourishment.com.au)

[www.taichiforhealthinstitute.org](http://www.taichiforhealthinstitute.org). This website has a host of information, including tai chi research, free sample lessons, and an online store to purchase DVD's.

[www.livingchi.com.au](http://www.livingchi.com.au). Interesting articles about the health benefits of tai chi, and an online store featuring books and DVD's. Tai Chi for Athletes, a DVD by Shane Eversfield (available on Amazon)

### YANG TAI CHI FOR BEGINNERS PART 1.

This free app teaches the complete Yang-style Tai Chi long form with step-by-step instruction by Master Yang.

**TAI CHI YANG 24 FORM.** This app for Android generates a virtual Tai Chi master using 3D gaming technology.

**TAI CHI STEP BY STEP.** This app for iOS devices has simple instructions and drawings to guide you through a tai chi session.