

# Gusto

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## ANCIENT CHINESE MARTIAL ART HEALS AUSTINITES

by Beth Goulart

Photography by Barton Wilder Custom Images

When the Summer Olympics kicked off in Beijing last summer, some thirty-five million American viewers tuned in to watch the opening ceremonies on television. In the great Bird's Nest arena, between synchronized drummers and "aah" inspiring pyrotechnics, precisely two thousand eight tai chi practitioners clad in snow white performed their ancient art. To most viewers, tai chi struck a familiar chord. Who hasn't seen it performed in a public park or heard its name spoken in conjunction with stress relief and relaxation? In Chi-



Tom Gohring leads a Tai Chi class at Master Gohring's Tai Chi & Kung Fu.



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Marjorie Jackson started Austin Tai Chi with her husband and business partner, Danny Boone,

na, though, the practice of tai chi is a way of life.

Like most stories of a certain age, tai chi's history is nowadays obscured by some degree of mystery. Its roots trace back to China's ancient feudal times, when monks and warriors representing warring city-states developed systems of martial arts, many founded in the philosophical teachings of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Several distinct styles of tai chi, also called tai chi chuan, represent its various lineages today. The one best-known to Americans is that which Cheng Man-Ch'ing brought with him from China to Taiwan, then to the United States in 1964.

Tai chi is, foremost, a martial art. Its gentle style seems graceful, even dance-like to many observers, and it is often described as a moving meditation, since it develops a keen control of the mind. Its techniques, though, are designed for combat. It is closely related to kung fu, the term generally used to describe the "external" form of tai chi (considered "internal") because of its focus on muscular strength and sparring with opponents.

Master Cheng, though, had learned tai chi for his health: He first pursued it as a means of combating tuberculosis. It has long been accepted as a means of improving balance and decreasing the likelihood of falling in the elderly. But these days, increasingly frequent new studies testify to tai chi's diverse health benefits. This year alone, studies published in respected, peer-reviewed journals have attested to its improvement in controlling Type 2 diabetes, promotion of healthier sleep in older adults, and easing of knee pain as well as

improved knee function, in elderly sufferers of osteoarthritis. These studies join the archives of what's been learned in years past: Tai chi is beneficial for increasing bone formation in the elderly; it boosts seniors' T-cell activity to improve immunity to virus-borne maladies like shingles; and it lowers systolic blood pressure, potentially reducing the incidence of stroke and heart attack. According to Professor Timothy Schallert, PhD, of the University of Texas at Austin there's reason to believe that tai chi may even benefit patients afflicted with Parkinson's disease, since motor enrichment has been shown to slow the degeneration of brain cells in animals. But, he emphasizes, controlled studies are still needed.

#### AUSTIN TAI CHI

When Allandale resident Janna Whitt decided to try tai chi, she hoped it might help the symptoms of an autoimmune disease, ankylosing spondylitis, in addition to helping her manage stress. In October, she started classes at Austin Tai Chi, a school that opened in August 2007, and she hasn't looked back. She knows her stress management has improved, and is optimistic about the long-term effect the low-impact exercise will have on her joints, which suffer the brunt of her disease. The spiritual and homeopathic teachings that instructor Marjorie Jackson incorporates into her classes have been a pleasant surprise for Whitt. "I picture myself doing this for a very long time," she says, "to stay very young at heart, mind and body."

Jackson started Austin Tai Chi when she and her husband and busi-



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ness partner, Danny Boone, relocated to Austin from Los Angeles to be near Boone's family. Jackson had taught tai chi in L.A. for eighteen years, eventually meeting Boone in one of her classes. For more than ten years they studied together under Tung Kai Ying, a Chinese master who is a descendent of the Yang family for whom the style is named, and they continue to follow his guidance today.

The classes Jackson and Boone teach range through beginner, intermediate and advanced at six locations around Austin on four days each week. This decentralized approach, says Jackson, is aimed at bringing tai chi to people where they live. "I want to make it easy," she says in explaining why she doesn't mind driving all over town to teach. "I want to affect in a healthy manner as many human beings as I can in Austin," she says.

### MASTER GOHRING'S TAI CHI

When Juanita Johnson started tai chi three years ago, it wasn't her idea. Her daughter, Terry Johnson-Growden, asked her to come along to try it after reading about its healthful benefits. Johnson-Growden had done some Internet research and discovered Master Gohring's Tai Chi and Kung Fu school just north of Highland Mall on Airport Boulevard, so they went there for their first class.

Several moves in, recalls Johnson, then sixty-three, "I looked over at my daughter and said, 'Oh, I can do this.'" The moves were simple, easy. They didn't even feel like exercise. "And then about two more moves and I'm thinking, 'Lord, I hope this is going to be over soon,' because sweat was pouring. I was tired. I was finding parts of my body

## TWO WAYS TO TAI CHI IN AUSTIN

**Austin Tai Chi**—Marjorie Jackson and Danny Boone run this school from six locations around the city. For specific class times and venues, call 512-916-8919 or visit [www.austintaichi.com](http://www.austintaichi.com). The first class is free; each subsequent class costs \$10, payable by cash or check.

**Master Gohring's Tai Chi and Kung Fu**—Master Tom Gohring runs the school he founded at 6611 Airport Blvd., just north of Highland Mall. For more information, call 512-879-7553 or visit [www.mastergohring.com](http://www.mastergohring.com). An introductory session is free, then about \$129 per month with a contract.

—Beth Goulart

I'd forgotten I had," she says.

A year and a half later, Johnson and her daughter recruited their husbands, too, and the four have been commuting from their shared duplex near the Austin airport to practice together ever since. All four cite dramatic, quantifiable health benefits including improved blood-sugar levels (three of them are diabetic), in addition to reduced stress and lower blood pressure, plus a better overall sense of well-being.

Their progress isn't just evident in their health, though. It's also chartable in their colorful sashes. At Master Gohring's studio, students wear uniforms and start with white sashes, then earn new colors from gold to black, plus stripes at intermediate levels, as they master skills. Terry Johnson-Growden leads her family in a brown sash, her mother sports purple, and the two men wear green sashes.

The sash program is just one of the ways that Tom Gohring, the studio's owner, establishes the culture of his school. When Gohring, a native Austinite, started teaching tai chi twelve years ago, his approach

was informal. Students wore whatever made them comfortable and addressed him by his first name. "It didn't work," he recalls. "People didn't take it seriously." Without a formalized structure, he found that students floundered, whereas the structure he now imposes provides leadership and direction that he feels helps his students learn. "If you don't get the culture with it, then it's just an exercise," he says. "So for us, it's not just an exercise."

Students bow in greeting to others when they enter and exit the school, address each other by formal titles and Gohring as "Master," and incorporate formal hand gestures and bows into their interactions, such as before and after sparring, when elements of kung fu are introduced for more advanced students. "Formality and tradition," says Gohring, "that's the fun part."

### TWO SCHOOLS, ONE MARTIAL ART

The differences in style between Master Gohring's school and Austin Tai Chi are huge, but they do, indeed, both teach the same discipline.

While Gohring adds elements of the lesser-known Chen style of tai chi for intermediate and advanced students, both schools teach Yang to beginners. Their differences are important, though, and something prospective students should consider in choosing a path for their own tai chi experiences.

Marjorie Jackson of Austin Tai Chi says that different traditions of tai chi are only the beginning of the differences in instruction. Much as with yoga, she says, even within a single tradition—the Yang style, for instance—teachers' styles vary widely. And finding a teacher who feels right is key. "I really encourage people to maybe go to five different teachers," she says, before choosing one. "What matters is that you find somebody you're crazy about. That you feel that it would be fun to come back here every week."

Jackson also recommends starting with a buddy. "Find a relative, a neighbor, a coworker," she says. "And come to class together." It's a strategy that has worked for the Johnson family at Gohring's school. Juanita Johnson is sixty-five now. "Sometimes I think I'm too old to do this," she says, "but the more I do it, the younger I feel." She has more energy, an improved outlook, a renewed sense of strength. "It's kind of an addiction, in a way. But it's a good addiction." ☺

*Beth Goulart battled unbearable cravings for chai tea while reporting this story on tai chi. Fortunately, the two are not mutually exclusive. You may e-mail Beth at [bgoulart@goodlifemag.com](mailto:bgoulart@goodlifemag.com).*

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