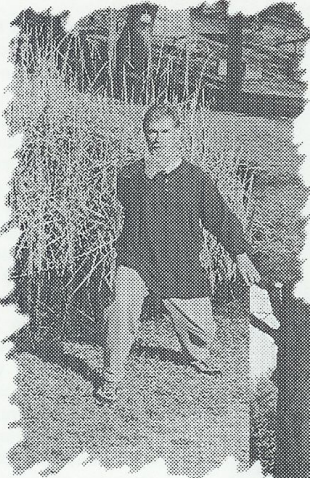


# Boomers

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## "Supreme Ultimate" Exercise for Boomers

by Luann Bertaux



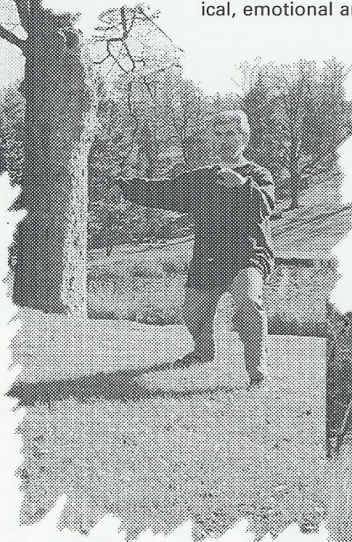
Imagine a form of exercise that relieves stress, improves health and increases your mental and emotional well-being. Now imagine that it requires no special equipment, very little space, and no unflattering spandex or overpriced shoes. Finally, imagine that in performing this exercise, the average 40 year old has a distinct advantage over supremely conditioned twenty-somethings like Jerome Bettis or Venus Williams.

Imagine no longer, because such an exercise really does exist. Furthermore, it's not a new age creation, but a very old one – the ancient Chinese practice of T'ai Chi Chuan.

T'ai Chi Chuan (commonly called T'ai Chi) is Chinese for "supreme ultimate self-discipline." It is practiced as a

series of slow, choreographed movements performed in a relaxed and flowing manner that strengthen the body and the mind. Most baby boomers probably first saw T'ai Chi during news broadcasts of President Nixon's 1972 visit to China.

Pittsburgher Stan Swartz, then a practicing psychologist, also discovered T'ai Chi in the early seventies. Swartz found that for him, T'ai Chi was an ideal way to relax and tone the body and focus the mind. He also saw it as "a profound physical, emotional and psycho-



logical vehicle for change." Swartz was so convinced of the Chinese exercise's benefits that he started a new career, teaching the practice and philosophy of T'ai Chi in

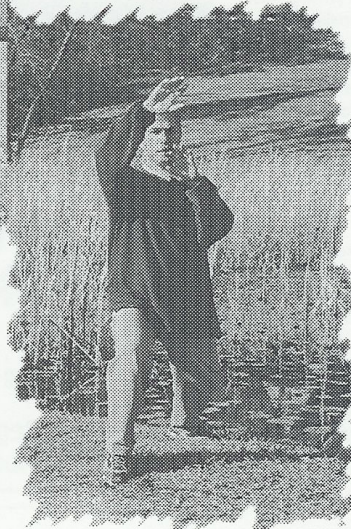
Europe, Puerto Rico and Florida. Since 1982, he has instructed T'ai Chi full-time to students throughout the Pittsburgh area.

One typical misconception about T'ai Chi is that it is primarily a martial art, like Karate or Judo. Swartz says that the martial arts component "is actually the least important thing in T'ai Chi. A student only learns it after many years of practice, after the tension and need [for aggression] are released." T'ai Chi, according to Swartz, "is 90% mental – although your legs may tell you differently."

Physically, T'ai Chi can tone muscles, enhance breathing, decrease blood pressure, increase flexibility and improve balance. A recent study with senior citizens showed that those who regularly practiced T'ai Chi were less likely to fall than those in the control group or groups that practiced other forms of exercise. "We become stiffer and tenser with age," says Swartz.

T'ai Chi enables those who practice

**Continued  
on back**



# "Supreme Ultimate" Exercise

## Continued from front

it to release that stiffness and tension. It is ideal for people who practice sports like skiing, in which flexibility enhances performance.

The mental and emotional benefits of T'ai Chi are at least as great as the physical ones. Stress reduction is the most touted. Students of T'ai Chi learn to relax, let go of worries and live in the present. "Most of us," says Swartz, "are holding our breath, stuck in the past and preoccupied with the future. T'ai Chi focuses on what you are doing with yourself here and now." The practice of T'ai Chi also sharpens the mind by increasing the student's ability to concentrate and capacity for self-discipline.

Baby Boomers are in the perfect stage of life to take up T'ai Chi, says Swartz, who at 55 considers himself an "early boomer." Persons with less life experience may not have the patience or commitment for T'ai Chi. Until around age forty, says Swartz, "we are not psychologically ready. By forty, we've tried everything else, and nothing is working."

Swartz offers two types of T'ai Chi classes, the T'ai Chi "form" which links together 37 different movements that take about a year and a half to learn, and the "eight methods," which are simple movements performed together or separately. Swartz encourages most people to learn the "form," while primarily recommending the "eight methods" for senior citizens or persons with serious health problems. Students should practice T'ai Chi twice daily, ideally in the morning and evening.

Swartz teaches T'ai Chi indoors, but recommends



practicing outdoors, weather permitting. Pittsburgh is perfect for outdoor T'ai Chi, says Swartz, because of the city's beautiful parks and rivers. T'ai Chi movements are often compared to a flowing river, and students are encouraged to emulate water. "Water is soft," says Swartz, "but powerful enough to overcome everything."

Many of Swartz's students have experienced positive life changes in the regular practice of T'ai Chi. The most commonly reported benefit is stress reduction, although students also see improvement in some health conditions, such as high blood pressure. One student, who has a form of multiple sclerosis, could barely stand and was afraid to carry her grandchild when she began T'ai Chi. Two years later, she walks and holds her grandchildren with ease. So what is the key to tapping into T'ai Chi's physical, mental and emotional benefits? "Relax," says Swartz. "The trick is learning how to do it."

For more information about T'ai Chi Chuan and class times, costs and locations, call Stan Swartz at 412-421-8580.



## T'ai Chi

Stan Swartz  
(412) 421-8580

Call for specific class dates, times and locations.

Regent Square \* South Hills \* Downtown  
Monroeville \* North Hills \* Greensburg