

# Cloud Hands 雲手

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## *Meditation: Active Stillness*

Tai chi chuan has an uneasy relationship with the New Age Movement. While offering many of the benefits—relaxation, focus, energy—that so many adherents seek, its true approach is a highly pragmatic one, which requires just as much hard work as it does “good vibes.”

It's taught than learning and practicing intent is an essential step in a TCC practitioners. Understanding the movements in the form and how they are applied is a tremendous help in this respect. However, knowledge without focus is insufficient, and one must learn to concentrate all of their attentions in order to make genuine progress. It's this process—a balance of physical relaxation and mental activity—that can be the most challenging aspect of all.

The status of modern TCC is that many teachers have removed some of its core elements in order to create a version that is less martial, easier to learn and far friendlier than the package actually offers as a whole. As such, it's no surprise that so few people have a clear idea of what the TCC actually is.

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INTERNATIONAL WU STYLE  
TAI CHI CHUAN FEDERATION

國際吳家太極拳協會



\* *The net of the cloud is cast,  
gathering all the great writers together*

# Cloud Hands 雲手

 **Editorial** by Geoff Girvitz

## Editorial

Within this state of affairs, it is sometimes problematic to address the issue of meditation, which is more often associated with spiritual beliefs than exercise or even one's day-to-day well-being. However, meditation a common practice among martial artists and TCC is no exception. The only question is how such a seemingly abstract exercise can benefit such concrete goals.

*In* this issue of Cloud Hands, we learn about how meditation is an integral component of TCC and why that is. Sifu Steve Britt shares his views about its place in practice, while Dr. Mark Langweiler provides concrete information on the astonishing role that meditation can play in good health. We also celebrate Sifu Eddie Wu's birthday and hear about disciple week in Toronto.

So take a deep breath, relax and forget about tuning into the cosmos. Instead, just turn the page and enjoy.

Geoff Girvitz  
Editor



 **Sifu Stephen Britt: Tai Chi Chuan and Meditation** by Ursula Bagnell for Cloudhands

Sifu's  
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Sifu Stephen Britt began training in Wu Style Tai Chi Chuan with Sifu Eddie Wu Kwong Yu shortly after the latter's arrival in Canada. At this point in time, few Westerners had heard about tai chi chuan (TCC), let alone understood it enough to make an informed decision as to whether to train it. Sifu Britt's initial interest stemmed from the recommendations of friends in Toronto's Chinese community. These individuals were familiar with the Wu Family and believed that being able to learn from one of its members would be a remarkable opportunity. Upon further investigation, Sifu Britt was intrigued to discover that TCC shared a strong relationship with Taoism, a system of philosophy that he was keenly fascinated with. It was not until he began studying TCC, however, that he began to understand the full extent of the art's offerings, from its health benefits to its martial applications.

Sifu Britt was taken on as a disciple of Sifu Wu in 1986. The following year, in accordance with his teacher's wishes, he opened up an academy in Royal Oak, Michigan. Since that time, Sifu Britt has taken on four full-time instructors and expanded his circle of teaching to reach 32 different locations in Metropolitan Detroit. Approximately one third of Sifu Britt's programs, which are conducted in conjunction with local hospitals and medical professionals, deal with the rehabilitative applications of Wu Style TCC.

**Cloud Hands:**

What is the objective of meditation with respect to TCC?

**Sifu Britt:**

There are three basic levels of training in TCC: Health, meditation and martial. The way Sifu [Wu] explains it is without your health, forget about meditation. And without your health and meditation, then forget about the martial. The purpose of meditation training in TCC is to improve our ability to concentrate, as well as to stay focused and relaxed under pressure. Any other target for meditation falls under the heading of religious training, not TCC.

*TCC* is like water. It benefits everybody equally, regardless of denomination. If there is a "cross-over" into spiritual training, it would be that anything a person does to improve their health, their relaxation and their ability to focus will assist them in their devotional activities—whatever those activities may be.



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**Cloud Hands:**

*Is TCC a holistic art?*

**Sifu Britt:**

*Holistic is a very new age term, referring to systems that benefit the whole being of the trainee. I am careful to resist describing it using this terminology, as it implies that it is just another in a long list of new age therapies. If anything, TCC is an “old age” art created through the sweat and dedication of teachers and students through centuries of development.*

**Cloud Hands:**

*What aspect of TCC does meditation fall under?*

**Sifu Britt:**

*Good health assists meditation. Good meditation assists martial training. They are intertwined, but health must come first.*

**Cloud Hands:**

*How does meditation relate to the various aspects of TCC?*

**Sifu Britt:**

*When we meditate, we are also training physically. The meditation postures make you sweat, make your legs shake, challenge your coordination and demand correct abdominal breathing. In spite of the physical “work” going on, the instruction is to relax! This demands intense focus. The better we can concentrate and relax under the stress of the training the greater the benefit—physically and psychologically. When you are meditating, you can’t focus on your daily problems at the same time. So for the duration of your training you put aside the various issues of your day-to-day life.*

*“A change is as good as a holiday,” as the saying goes. When you are finished meditating, you are refreshed physically and have calmed down, finding yourself in a renewed and improved position when your return to the pressures of daily life. Everyone knows that stress damages health, so anything you do to repair the physical damage caused by daily life is a tremendous tonic for your health.*

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In terms of martial application, the soft nature of TCC's techniques will not work for you if you are panicked and consequently tense. So the training we do to maintain our focus under pressure feeds directly back into our martial development.

**Cloud Hands:**

What are the differences between meditating alone and with a group?

**Sifu Britt:**

Since the postures require discipline and stamina, we are less likely to “cave-in” and pull out of a posture prematurely when we are training with others. The energy of being around others working to the same purpose is also revitalizing. As a result, group meditation is essential. But we do have homework to do as well. Maintaining the benefits of our training requires our constantly monitoring ourselves; catching and releasing tension as it arises, watching and being aware of how we are breathing and so on. So training alone is essential too.

**Cloud Hands:**

Is there a difference between standing and sitting meditation?

**Sifu Britt:**

There are four categories of meditation in TCC: Stillness inside/stillness outside; stillness inside/motion outside; motion inside/stillness outside; motion inside/motion outside.

The vast majority of meditation in TCC is done standing. Sitting meditation tends to focus more on the stillness aspects of meditation, but not exclusively. You must follow your sifu's directions as to what form of meditation to train, as well as how and when to train.

**Cloud Hands:**

Some people regard meditation as kind of “out there.” How do you explain its importance to a beginner and go about instructing them on how to meditate?

**Sifu Britt:**

Don't think of meditation as separate from training. It is not. The beginner must learn how to train TCC. The meditative benefit comes from correct training of the forms, pushing hands and so on. If a beginner starts trying to figure out how to meditate without learning how to train first, it is like trying to eat before you've cooked your food.

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 **Sifu Stephen Britt: Tai Chi Chuan and Meditation** by Ursula Bagnell for Cloudhands

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**Cloud Hands:**

*TCC* is sometimes referred to as “meditation in movement.” What does that mean?

**Sifu Britt:**

This is a title that Westerners came up with to find some way to categorize TCC. When you go through the 108 postures, you are connecting some 4,000 individual pieces of motion over a period of 25 to 30 minutes. At the same time that you are refining your breathing, you are trying to relax, coordinate, follow the speed of the group and ignore the burning in your legs. If this does not improve your concentration and relaxation skills under pressure, I don't know what would!

**Cloud Hands:**

How often do you practice meditation in your club? Is it specific to beginner, intermediate, or senior classes?

**Sifu Britt:**

Even though they don't know it, beginners develop meditation skills while learning the form. Meditation is such a misunderstood thing to the Western mind that it is good to avoid even using the word until the student has a strong foothold on how to train, lest they confuse themselves and get their training priorities out of skew. Health comes first, and this requires work.

In the late intermediate level we begin to talk about meditation—once the student has already achieved some of the benefits that meditation brings. Then they have the right context. When you can say to a student “see how relaxed you are after that training?” and they respond “Yes!”, then all you have to do is say, “Well that's the meditative aspect of TCC.” Then there is no confusion. The student knows what they did to achieve the result.

Remembering that all training in Tai Chi Chuan is meditation in one form or another, it is customary to do a few “meditations” prior to the form to assist the student in composing their mind, calming their breathing and balancing their circulation prior to jumping” into the form.



 **Meditation as Therapy?:** Dr. Mark J. Langweiler, DC, DAAPM

**Health  
Matters**

As practitioners of tai chi chuan we have all been exposed to the concept of meditation in one form or another. After all, TCC is often referred to as meditation in motion, although that isn't what I am writing about today. What I will describe, however, is meditation as therapy. If we turn to Webster's dictionary we see meditation defined as "an act of spiritual contemplation." In today's world, however, that definition is far too narrow. Not only are there many types of spiritual meditative practices, over the past two or so decades, many non-spiritual techniques have been developed. From a psychophysiological (yes, a mouthful—just think mind/body) point of view, meditation can be considered as an intentional self-regulation of attention. And while there is an abundance of these non-spiritual techniques being practiced, they all include several common components:

1. **Relaxation:** It is crucial that we get into a position that allows our bodies to relax. That is why so many of these practices rely on the lotus position. Once you get the feel for it, the position's stability gives the body a chance to relax without falling over.
2. **Development of an altered state of awareness:** This can be achieved using breath control, focus, etc.
3. **Suspension of the logical thought processes:** Anyone who meditates, or at least tried it, knows how difficult it is to get your mind to stop moving, as thoughts are continually popping up, passing through and jumping out at us.
4. **Maintenance of a self-observing, non-judgemental attitude:** This is another difficult feat, since it is common for many people to be overly self-critical.
5. **Concentration or focus:** Again there are several approaches, two of which I explain below.

Using the above criteria as a basis, we find two major groups of meditative practices: Those that focus on perception or mindfulness meditation, such as vipassana, and those practices that focus on specific objects or actions, or utilize concentration techniques, such as Zen.

What happens when one enters a meditative state? Research has revealed some consistent physical changes, regardless of technique used. The earliest studies, which were conducted by Herbert Benson at the Harvard Medical School in the 1960s, found that all the participants—regardless of their length of practice—experienced a significant drop in metabolic rate (as shown by decreased O<sub>2</sub> consumption). Other changes included lower levels of blood pressure, which, while universal, were most significant in those with abnormally high blood pressure readings. There was also an increase in skin electrical resistance indicating a reduction in general muscle tension, found with profound relaxation.



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Changes in the nervous system were noted, including a reduction in sympathetic response—the fight or flight portion of the system—and an increase in the parasympathetic response—the calming part of the system.

As we relax, there is an increase in blood flow throughout the muscles. This increase has been shown to have a beneficial effect by removing lactate, a by-product of stress and muscle tension. Meditators have shown a four-fold increase in lactate removal over both non-meditators and meditators who are simply resting. It would seem that the actual act of meditation puts people into a highly relaxed, yet, very alert state. The benefits accrued by regular meditation appear to go well beyond the surface of the activity—or rather, lack of activity—involved.

The actual positive changes that have been recorded using meditation cover a wide array of body systems:


- Deep rest with a simultaneous heightened alertness as revealed via EEG
- Lowered metabolic rate and a reduced work load of the heart
- Stress reduction, most likely as a result of muscle relaxation and the related decrease in lactate and cortisol, two chemicals intimately involved with increased stress levels
- A reduction of free radicals, unstable chemicals that are known to cause tissue damage and have been implicated in the ageing process
- Decreased high blood pressure
- Decreased levels of cholesterol (the mechanism for this isn't clear, but the findings are fairly consistent)
- A decrease in heart disease related problems. Based on the work by Dean Ornish, MD, of which meditation is an important component, meditation is the only program of exercise scientifically validated to reverse heart disease
- Increased levels of DHEAS, a blood constituent that tends to decrease as we age
- A lowered overall biological age. Many studies have shown that people who meditate regularly show a chronological age when that is, on average, 12 years younger than that of non-meditators.

Along with the general physiological changes noted, specific diseases that can be potentially improved by meditation are:

- Psoriasis, a moderately common condition where the skin develops red, scaly patches and the skin flakes off. A pilot study performed by Dr. Kabat-Zinn found that meditators with





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psoriasis showed more rapid healing compared to those patients who only received traditional medical treatment. Apparently there is an unknown mechanism at work here that affects the immune response.

- Women experiencing premenstrual syndrome show a reduction in physical complaints including headaches
- Sufferers of irritable bowel syndrome, ulcers and insomnia, all of which have a stress component, show general improvement when meditation is added to their therapy
- People experiencing chronic pain also respond well. This on-going pain, with no clear cause, can dramatically alter a persons life, eroding the quality, destroying relationships, leading to depression and anxiety. Studies have revealed that in as little as 8 weeks, chronic pain patients can achieve a 33% reduction in pain, with many reporting a 50% reduction.
- Patients with arthritis and fibromyalgia consistently respond to meditative therapy with a reduction in their symptoms.

So far I have been looking at the various physical problems that can be effected using meditation as therapy. There are also numerous psychological problems that respond. Not being a psychotherapist, I won't go into these in any detail, but just mention that studies have shown that meditation is useful in controlling depression, anxiety and panic attacks, both as disease entities in and of themselves, and as associated with other disease such as cancer.

One note of caution is that not all of the effects of meditation are benign. Many people have experienced from mild to severe psychological complications such as relaxation-induced anxiety, confusion and depression, as well as difficulty reconnecting with reality. These problems, however, occur in a very small minority and meditation, overall, is quite safe. However, if you would like to pursue meditation for therapeutic purposes you would be well advised to find a practitioner who possesses familiarity with your specific problem, in addition to the appropriate type of meditation.

Deaja Napier, founder of the Insight Meditation Center of Boston stated "Meditation is a humble process that gently returns one to the now of our lives and allows us to wake up and re-evaluate the way we live our lives." Given the sheer number of benefits derived from practicing meditation, it's clear that it offers tremendous benefits to your health and well-being. With that in mind, don't just stand there, sit down!

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 **Celebrations on Toronto Island:** by Susan Walker

## Spotlight

*Imagine my surprise very early one Sunday morning in July when, upon entering the club, I found myself surrounded by an international delegate of friendly, tousle-haired Wu Style practitioners.*

*There was the gang from Fredericton- Sifu Eddie Wu's disciple Sifu Martin Kennedy and his own disciples Mary, Bobby, Claude and Wayne from New Jersey. Two of Sifu Larry Hawkins' students, John and Mat, had made an equally gruelling trip from Minneapolis. Of course, it was disciple week in Toronto and today, July 18th was the annual picnic in honour of Sifu's birthday.*

*Well, this was just the tip of the iceberg. It turns out people had come from all over. Eugene came all the way from Hong Kong headquarters and honoured us with his presence. From Indianapolis, we met John Bitterman and Matthew Vernon, both of whom had come to be certified by Sifu Wu. Marcus, a student of Master Lee, came to be certified as well, and brought his gang from Montreal. We can now look forward to having a certified training centre in Montreal.*

*Not everybody was able to stay for the picnic, but those who did joined a great bunch of Toronto club members on Toronto Island for a truly wonderful afternoon. Also in attendance were Sifu Cynthia Wu, her husband Peter and their dog Coco. Simo Winnie [Wu]'s son Jeffrey delighted us with his presence. The skies cleared up just in time and, thanks to the immaculate organizing and planning skills of Jacquie Joseph and Jocelyne LaChapelle, not to mention the willingness of other club members, all had a great time.*

*There was plenty of chatting, laughing and eating. We also enjoyed some great demos, including forty or so people performing the 108-Traditional Form, as well as the official China tournament team demonstrating the 54-Competition Round Form. Swords, sabres and spears glinted in the sunlight beneath great big trees and bright blue skies as the demonstrations came to a close. As the sun began to set. Sifu Wu graciously made our day by thanking us for the birthday gift of seeing us all together doing our forms.*