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The following article was written by T'ai Chi teacher Trevor Reynaert

How I Overcome and Control My Back Pain

It's now over 25 years since I first succumbed to back pain.

Youthful years enjoying competition cycling with an inevitable arched back initiated the damage. In my late 30's recovery from a major ankle injury involved over 6 months of imbalanced movement and it was then that the spinal deterioration really kicked in. I soon began to experience severe lower back problems, often leading to a total leg collapse. This preceded days of severe pain accompanied by spasm and near complete immobility, followed by several weeks of limited movement, often with months before a return to reasonable pain-reduced mobility. Conventional physio seemed to do little, if anything, to help.

After several relapses I started to realise that as well as posture and unbalanced movement, stress was also a contributory trigger factor. I had stumbled across references to T'ai Chi over the years and out of curiosity I started on my own journey, not as a martial art, but inspired by its attribute of calm and perceived gentle movement. I looked for a teacher but the ones I approached either advised that with chronic back pain I would not be a suitable student, or tried to teach me in a conventional way, encouraging classic unachievable postures and movements that only succeeded in creating unnecessary tension as I tried to protect my body from further damage. I resorted to study and self-teaching, modifying movement to my own ability.

In 2001 I heard about Dr Paul Lam's modified Sun TC program and attended his first UK workshop. Although just recovering from a severe re-occurrence, I was made welcome and encouraged to join in at my own pace. I was soon practising his program on a daily basis and also teaching it. What a difference this has made to the succeeding years.

I now attribute a dramatic reduction in the occurrences of my chronic lower back pain to the regular practice of Dr Lam's Tai Chi for Arthritis and Back Pain. The gentle exercise and posture awareness over the past nine years have meant that the instances of once regular relapses have progressively reduced, with no severe spasm. When recurrences do occur, the initial recovery period has reduced to a few days and the overall return to full mobility is only a week or so, not months. General referred pain has also been considerably reduced.

Unfortunately, despite care and awareness, relapses do occur. So how do I use T'ai Chi to overcome my back pain?

As soon as symptoms occur, I spend as much time as I can trying to relax, opening the joints to create "song". Breathing deeply and slowly, I visualise T'ai Chi /Qigong movement. This is done lying down or seated - it doesn't matter. As the recovery days progress I encourage more physical movement, initially seated, then working towards standing Sun style postures. Nothing extreme, gentle weight shift, small steps, definitely no kicks or even toe points at this stage. I call this form "Shuffle T'ai Chi".

Slowly, slowly, as days pass, realisation of more flexible and normal movement occurs and referred pain reduces. When full mobility is restored, continuing practice continues to build up muscle strength and helps to minimise the effects of the next inevitable episode. I tell everyone I teach that T'ai Chi will reward tenfold the effort put into it's practice. I know that it does for me.

So why is it that T'ai Chi has helped me overcome my back pain? Modern documented studies appear to provide an answer by showing that, in addition to all it's well-known benefits in balance improvement, body strengthening, stress-relief and general health, T'ai Chi also strengthens core muscles surrounding the spine.

So if you do suffer from episodes of back pain, no matter what your age is, after first reviewing your condition with your doctor, I recommend that you get a copy of Dr Lam's Tai Chi for Back Pain DVD and if possible find one of his authorised teachers. Persevere, and like me, start to enjoy your T'ai Chi with the new-found confidence and pain-reduced mobility it brings.