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### **An overview of my experiences with Taiji**

I approached this semester's study of Taiji with a certain level of skepticism: I didn't understand its applications, either as a martial art or as healthy practice. At the end of the semester, however, I can say that I have a changed attitude.

Modern daily life contains such a number of stressful stimuli and distractions that the body is often abused. For myself, this consists of a number of bad habits: bad posture (long hours spent sitting hunched over a computer) and insufficient sleep. Taiji has forced me to take a step back from all of this. In normal life I focus on the outside demands of the world, and of my own mind: work and commitments to myself, my friends, and my family. The body is merely subservient to all of this; it's a mere tool. Taiji demands instead putting the body and the mind on an equal footing, and to achieve a high level of understanding, or harmony, between the two. This interconnectedness takes the form of conscious control over breathing; conscious adjustment of posture; and the slow, deliberate (and difficult) execution of a form. I think it's an indication of the degree to which the mind and the body are linked in Taiji that performing slowly (which is the way one is *supposed* to do, as I've learned from your class) is more challenging than running through the forms rapidly. If Taiji were simply about muscular and motor control, then performing quickly would be more difficult and require a higher level of practice and skill. But instead Taiji requires a high level of mental engagement, as a result of which it's more difficult to go slowly than quickly. This is because fast movement automatically passes under the unconscious control of the regions of the brains responsible for muscular coordination; in contrast, slow movement is unusual for the body and thus requires constant conscious engagement. Every movement; every breath must have a function and a meaning; the weight distribution of the body matters, and one must be aware of it such that one can perform any necessary adjustments.

In addition to the practice of the ten forms, I have greatly enjoyed our periods of meditation at the end of classes. Although at the face of it meditation has nothing to do with Taiji, to me they seem to me to carry very similar mindsets to slightly different practices. While Taiji focuses on movement, meditation is more static, and challenges you to make a mental connection with the different parts of your body, even when you aren't moving them.

It's because of these aspects, I believe, that Taiji has made me more self-aware, and given me the tools to be a less stressed and more inward person. I've started putting to use the meditation techniques we've learned, and have found that they put my psyche more at peace, even in the face of all the stresses of everyday life. Although I haven't practiced Taiji outside of class, I'm eager to continue learning and may enroll in a course once I go off to graduate school, if I have a chance.