Introduction to Ai Chi

Ai Chi is a water-based total body strengthening and relaxation progression that bridges East and West philosophies, and integrates mental, physical, and spiritual energy. It combines Tai-Chi concepts with Shiatsu and Watsu techniques, and is performed standing in shoulder-depth water using a combination of deep breathing and slow, broad movements of the arms, legs, and torso. The Ai Chi progression moves from simple breathing, to the incorporation of upper-extremity, trunk, lower-extremity, and finally total body involvement.

Ai Chi was created to help aquatic practitioners (including aquatic exercise instructors, personal trainers, and aquatic therapy and rehabilitation practitioners) and students enjoy the water in a flowing yet powerful progression. It is an efficient exercise program that increases oxygen and caloric consumption through correct form and positioning in the water, a perfect relaxation technique for highly stressed, over-challenged clients, and is ideal for creating improved range of motion and mobility.

Jun Konno, ATRIC, creator of Ai Chi, is one of Japan’s foremost swimming and fitness consultants and the President of Aqua Dynamics Institute (Japanese chapter of AEA). Since 1986, he has worked to promote aquatics in Japan and is Chairman of the Executive Committee for Japan’s National Aquatic Conference.

Benefits of Ai Chi

Flexibility and core (abdominal) strength are the benefits most mentioned by aquatic exercise instructors. The trunk stabilization/balance and pain management benefits of the program are the two most frequently cited by aquatic therapists. Clients’ comments include: "a soothing experience", "mind and body relaxation", and "a symphony for my body". Such benefits increase with practice. As a person becomes more familiar with the program, relaxation will be improved, with a focus on the smallest movement of the hand, wrist, or eyes, and improved mental alertness.

Water lessens edema in the joints, which allows clients to improve range of motion and mobility. The soft, round flowing motions strengthen core muscles while providing a soothing experience, and the circular movements create harmony, based on a principle of yielding to, rather than resisting the natural flow.

The flowing movements of Ai Chi can increase metabolism and blood circulation. Studies show that simply breathing while submerged to the shoulder in water can increase oxygen consumption from 7 to 25 percent. This, in turn, increases caloric consumption.

Potential Benefits of Ai Chi

1. Improved flexibility, range of motion, and general mobility
2. Improved metabolism and caloric consumption
3. Better blood circulation
4. Re-vitalized energy circulation along important accupoint meridians
5. Renewal of vital organs
6. Improved liver efficiency
7. Decreased stress, insomnia, depression, anger, fatigue, anxiety, and confusion: the water and music can help to free the body of stress and to encourage a state of relaxed awareness
8. Increased mental alertness
9. Creates "design sense" (a feeling that you’re doing what the body was designed to do) and therefore, improves kinesthetic sense (our perception of how we move)
Physical Movement Principles

- Roundness, continuity, naturalness, and slowness. Slowness allows reflection and self-observation. It is an excellent approach to teaching movement, especially if a person is fearful of changing movement patterns. Clients need to challenge habitual movement patterns through continual self-assessment. There is a Japanese proverb that says, “Willow does not break under weight of snow”. Stiff or inflexible branches, bones, and psyches will break, yet the pliant willow will not. Pliant bones, connective tissues, and psyches won’t break: Ai Chi can help to make one pliant.

- Movements must flow (not forceful in the beginning of a move but of equal force throughout the move). Work towards continuity with a continual flow between exercise movements. Flowing movements integrate mental, physical, and spiritual energy. Ai Chi is flowing, soft, round movements executed with a profound inwardly directed focus. It requires a non-judgmental attention to self.

- Move with the water (muscles and joints will relax and eyes become partly closed). Move naturally until the motions flow easily, with no straining. Ai Chi should be done slowly, gently, and quietly. By eliminating all other thoughts, you’ll achieve a unity of movement and consciousness. Awareness of the mind’s presence in the various parts of the body is taught through the techniques of Ai Chi. With that training, we can acquire greater degrees of health, fitness, and longevity than through physical training alone.

- Repetition. Deep relaxation can only occur when you feel stable in the water and confident in your ability to follow the progression: repetition allows us to do this. The repetition in Ai Chi is for relaxation, not for evaluating success or failure. The challenge for those who are addicted to outward movement is a change in perspective. Jonathan Miller, famous English physician and writer, said, "In living things all restlessness is directed toward the achievement of tranquility." In Ai Chi, the focus is on tranquility, rather than the precision and rigidity of traditional exercise.

- Pelvic mechanics and alignment. Correct alignment is crucial. Twists created by the trunk stability movements are neutralizing, cleansing, and organic. They improve digestion and remove sluggishness, and are effective in relieving backaches, headaches, and stiffness in the shoulders and neck. After Ai Chi positioning is taught, natural, continual movement and slowness are taught, and then breathing is incorporated.

Ai Chi Can Assist with the Following Health Conditions

1. Chronic disorders and other diseases such as pain management, fibromyalgia, arthritis, cancer (especially mastectomy), multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, immunodeficiency disorders, and medical self-care
2. Respiratory disorders such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and pulmonary rehabilitation
3. Cardiovascular problems including congestive heart failure, angina, stress-related cardiac arrhythmias, mitral valve prolapse, and cardiac rehabilitation
4. Circulatory disorders such as hypertension and migraine headaches
5. Metabolic disorders including eating behaviors, weight control, type II diabetes, type I diabetes, and obesity
6. Psychological problems such as chronic fatigue syndrome, anxiety and depressive disorders, anger management, stress-related dysrhythmias, [sic] and violence
7. Musculoskeletal or orthopedic disturbances including low back pain, scoliosis, carpal tunnel syndrome (or any repetitive stress syndrome), musculoskeletal injuries and surgeries, balance deficits, prenatal, sports injuries, and accident and fall prevention
8. Neurological disturbances including cerebral vascular accidents (strokes) and traumatic brain injury
9. Endocrinological [sic] disorders such as immunodeficiency disorders, fatigue, menopause therapy, and hormonal management
Facility Requirements

Water temperature recommended for Ai Chi is 86ºF to 92ºF. Lower water temperatures can be used after an adequate warmup or with varied breathing patterns such as in the ashtanga yogic technique. If clients become chilled, stop the program. Blood and oxygen must be moving to the extremities to allow for full ROM. If the client is chilled, blood will be shunted to the vital organs (not the extremities) and muscles will tense. This is not conducive to relaxation and the full ROM Ai Chi movements.

Space requirements are about 25 square feet per person in water that is 12 to 18 inches lower than the person’s height.

Practitioner Education

Because of the different levels and depths of Ai Chi, any practitioner can use the program. The best practitioners will be those who understand the bodymind: the body, its disease processes, and the mind are connected.

Jun Konno, creator of Ai Chi, states that anyone, regardless of the depth of training, background, or type of training, should be able to teach Ai Chi. Ai Chi’s basic movements and breathing concepts always turn out the "way they were meant to be", and good teachers will use the Ai Chi principles to evolve into excellence through their own desire to grow.

Ai Chi Postures
**Ai Chi Movements - Breathing**

**Beginning position:**

Beginning position: Begin with your feet in a wide stance. Point your knees and toes somewhat out and keep your back straight. Both arms are forward (90-degree shoulder flexion), palms down (pronated) with thumbs touching each other. Bend your knees until the water is at shoulder level and your arms are resting easily at the water surface. Your weight is evenly balanced. Chin is relaxed and slightly down. This is the beginning position.

**NOTE:** RealPlayer is required to view each videoclip.

**Ai Chi Movements - Contemplating**

**Step one:**

All the following should occur simultaneously (and feel quite natural!). Inhale through your nose and turn your palms up (supinate). You will get a little "taller" in the water, your chin will come up and back slightly, your diaphragm will fill, and your rib cage will "open".

**Step two:**

Exhale easily through your mouth and turn your palms down while returning to beginning position. You will get lower in the water, your chin will relax, your rib cage will "close", and your diaphragm will empty.

**Step three:**

Repeat 5 to 10 times.

**Ai Chi Movements – Floating**

**Step one:**

Inhale through your nose and turn your palms up.

**Step two:**

Exhale through your mouth, turn your palms down, and let your arms lower in front of your body (shoulder extension).

**Step three:**

Inhale easily through your nose while turning your palms up and lifting your arms (shoulder flexion) slowly back to the water surface.

**NOTE:** RealPlayer is required to view each videoclip.
**Step four:**
Repeat steps two and three 5 to 10 times.

**Step five:**
Exhale through your mouth, turn your palms down, and let your arms lower in front of your body (shoulder extension).

**Ai Chi Movements - Enclosing**

**Step one:**
Exhale easily through your mouth while turning your palms down and bring your hands together in front of you until your thumbs touch each other (horizontal adduction).

**Step two:**
Inhale through your nose while turning your palms up and opening your arms to the sides (horizontal abduction). You will get a little "taller" in the water, your chin will come up and back slightly, and your rib cage will "open".

**Step three:**
Repeat steps one and two 5-10 times.

**Ai Chi Movements - Folding**

**Step one:**
Exhale easily through your mouth, turn your palms down, and bring your right arm over to the left so the thumbs of both hands touch each other, while shifting your weight to your left leg. Stay facing forward.

**Step two:**
While keeping your weight on your left leg, inhale through your nose, turn your palms up, and watch your right hand as you return your right arm to your right side.

**Step three:**
Exhale easily through your mouth, turn your palms down, and bring your left arm over to the right so the thumbs of both hands touch each other, while shifting your weight to the right leg.

**Step four:**
While keeping your weight on your right leg, inhale through your nose, turn your palms up, and watch your left hand as you return your left arm to your left side.

**Step five:**
Repeat steps one through four 5 to 10 times.

**Ai Chi Movements - Accepting**

**Step one:**
Exhale easily through your mouth, turn your palms down, and bring your right arm over to the left so the thumbs of both hands touch each other, while pivoting both feet 90 degrees left so you're facing the left side. Your weight is evenly balanced between both legs.
**Step two:**
While still facing left, inhale through your nose, turn your palms up, and pull both arms back so that your rib cage feels fully opened. At the same time, shift your weight back on the right leg so that you're leaning back slightly. The trunk must be stable.

**Step three:**
While still facing left, exhale through your mouth, turn your palms down, and bring both arms together so the thumbs of both hands touch each other. At the same time, shift your weight forward onto the left leg so you're leaning forward slightly.

**Step four:**
Repeat steps two and three flowing smoothly 5 to 10 times.

**Step five:**
Inhale through your nose, turn your palms up, bring your right arm back to the right side, while pivoting both feet 90 degrees right so you're facing front.

**Step six:**
Exhale easily through your mouth, turn your palms down, and bring your left arm over to the right so the thumbs of both hands touch each other, while pivoting both feet 90 degrees right so you're facing the right side. Your weight is evenly balanced between both legs.

**Step seven:**
While still facing right, inhale through your nose, turn your palms up, and pull both arms back so that your rib cage feels fully opened. At the same time, shift your weight back on the left leg so that you're leaning back slightly.

**Step eight:**
While still facing right, exhale through your mouth, turn your palms down, and bring both arms together so the thumbs of both hands touch each other. At the same time, shift your weight forward onto the right leg so you're leaning forward slightly.

**Step nine:**
Repeat steps seven and eight flowing smoothly 5 to 10 times.

**Step ten:**
Inhale through your nose, turn your palms up, and bring the left arm back to the left side, while pivoting both feet 90 degrees left so you're facing front.

**NOTE:** [RealPlayer](#) is required to view each videoclip.
Ai Chi Movements - Accepting with Grace

Step one:
Exhale easily through your mouth, turn your palms down, and bring your right arm over to the left so the thumbs of both hands touch each other, while pivoting both feet 90 degrees left so you're facing the left side. Your weight is evenly balanced between both legs.

Step two:
While still facing left, inhale through your nose, turn your palms up, and pull both arms back so your rib cage feels fully opened. At the same time, shift your weight back completely onto the right leg, lean back slightly, and lift your left leg straight in front of you.

Step three:
While still facing left, exhale through your mouth, turn your palms down, and bring both arms together so the thumbs of both hands touch each other. At the same time, lower your left leg so your torso is upright again.

Step four:
Repeat steps two and three flowing smoothly 5 to 10 times.

Step five:
Inhale through your nose, turn your palms up, and bring your right arm back to the right side, while pivoting both feet 90 degrees right so you're facing front.

Step six:
Exhale easily through your mouth, turn your palms down, and bring your left arm over to the right so the thumbs of both hands touch each other, while pivoting both feet 90 degrees right so you're facing the right side. Your weight is evenly balanced between both legs.

Step seven:
While still facing right, inhale through your nose, turn your palms up, and pull both arms back so that your rib cage feels fully opened. At the same time, shift your weight back completely onto the left leg, lean back slightly, and lift your right leg straight in front of you.

Step eight:
While still facing right, exhale through your mouth, turn your palms down, and bring both arms together so the thumbs of both hands touch each other. At the same time, lower your right leg so your torso is upright and tall.

Step nine:
Repeat steps seven and eight flowing smoothly 5 to 10 times.

Step ten:
Inhale through your nose, turn your palms up, and bring your left arm back to the left side, while pivoting both feet 90 degrees left so you're facing front.
Ai Chi Movements - Rounding

**Step one:**
Exhale easily through your mouth, turn your palms down, bring your right arm over to the left so the thumbs of both hands touch each other, while pivoting both feet 90 degrees left so you're facing the left side. Your weight is evenly balanced between both legs.

**Step two:**
While still facing left, inhale through your nose, turn your palms up, pull your arms back so that your rib cage feels fully opened. At the same time step your right leg back and shift your weight back so you're leaning back slightly.

**Step three:**
While still facing left, exhale through your mouth, turn your palms down, and bring both arms together so the thumbs of both hands touch each other. At the same time, lift your right leg straight in front of you and lean forward slightly. Bring toes to fingertips.

**Step four:**
Repeat steps two and three flowing smoothly 5 to 10 times.

**Step five:**
Inhale through your nose, turn your palms up, bring your right arm back to the right side, while pivoting both feet 90 degrees right so you're facing front.

**Step six:**
Exhale easily through your mouth, turn your palms down, bring your left arm over to the left so the thumbs of both hands touch each other, while pivoting both feet 90 degrees left so you're facing the left side. Your weight is evenly balanced between both legs.

**Step seven:**
While still facing right, inhale through your nose, turn your palms up, and pull your arms back so that your rib cage feels fully opened. At the same time, step your left leg back and shift your weight back so you're leaning back slightly.

**Step eight:**
While still facing right, exhale through your mouth, turn your palms down, and bring both arms together so the thumbs of both hands touch each other. At the same time, lift your left leg straight in front of you and lean forward slightly. Bring toes and fingertips together.

**Step nine:**
Repeat steps seven and eight flowing smoothly 5 to 10 times.

**Step ten:**
Inhale through your nose, turn your palms up, bring your left arm back to the left side, while pivoting both feet 90 degrees left so you're facing front.
**Ai Chi Movements - Flowing**

**Step one:**
Exhale easily through your mouth and turn your palms down while letting your arms lower and cross in front of your body. Knees and toes are pointed out and your back is straight.

**Step two:**
Inhale through your nose, keep your elbows in at your waist, turn your palms up, and open your forearms to the side. Simultaneously cross your right foot over the left and bend your knees slightly. Shoulders are relaxed.

**Step three:**
Exhale easily through your mouth, turn your palms down, and lower and cross your arms in front of your body. At the same time step your left foot to the left side so you have returned to the position in step one.

**Step four:**
Repeat steps two and three moving smoothly 5 to 10 times to the right.

**Step five:**
Inhale through your nose, keep your elbows in at your waist, turn your palms up, and open your forearms to the side. At the same time, cross your left foot over the right and bend your knees slightly.

**Step six:**
Exhale easily through your mouth, turn your palms down, and lower and cross your arms in front of your body. At the same time step your right foot to the right side.

**Step seven:**
Repeat steps five and six moving smoothly 5 to 10 times to the left.

**Step eight:**
Inhale through your nose, keep your elbows in at the waist, turn your palms up, and open your forearms to the side.

**Enjoy Ai Chi**

No two Ai Chi sessions will be the same, and that’s as it should be. Every movement will have variations according to what you, your body, and your psyche want that day. It’s fine to eliminate movements, put them in a different order, and change the tempo or the number of repetitions. Because we’re all different and Ai Chi serves each of us differently, we will all perform Ai Chi differently. Experiment with Ai Chi, be free and non-judgmental with yourself, and remember, "However your progression turns out is exactly how it was meant to be."

**About the Author**

An internationally recognized leader in the health and fitness industry, Ruth Sova is dedicated to the growth and betterment of the industry through her tireless research and development efforts. She has founded eight successful businesses and holds numerous honors and awards in the industry. She educates and energizes audiences with her presentations on personal growth, entrepreneurship, health, fitness, wellness, running a business, and aquatic rehab and fitness.

In 1994, she founded the Aquatic Therapy and Rehab Institute, Inc. (ATRI), a non-profit educational organization dedicated to the professional development of health care professionals involved with aquatic
therapy. ATRI, with headquarters in Chassell, MI, offers continuing education courses at conferences and workshops that advance the knowledge and skills of the aquatic therapist. She is also the founder and past president of the Aquatic Exercise Association (AEA), a non-profit international association serving as a clearinghouse for all aspects of the aquatics industry.

**Resources**

- Teaching materials include books, videos, poolside laminates, audiocassettes, and CDs. For a full list and descriptions go to [www.ruthsova.com](http://www.ruthsova.com).
- Workshops and certification courses are listed on the Aquatic Therapy and Rehab Institute website with other aquatic courses at [www.atri.org](http://www.atri.org).
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**Organizations**

1. **Aquatic Healing Services**: Charlottesville, Virginia

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