

## *The Outpost Exchange*

### **TAI CHI**

November 17, 2003

Maggie Jacobus

1,745 words

“I hate exercising. I despise it,” declared Sally Finnigan. “I wouldn’t be caught dead on a stationary bike.” Yet the 62-year-old Wauwatosa resident recognizes the importance of exercising to maintain her health as she ages. That’s why Finnigan does tai chi, a gentle, low impact--yet effective--form of exercise.

With its origins in Eastern philosophy and a holistic approach to health, Tai chi (pronounced *tie chee*) aims to address the body and mind as an interconnected system and to improve mental and physical health while benefiting posture, flexibility and strength. According to [intelihealth.com](http://intelihealth.com), a website created by the faculty of Harvard Medical School, “Preliminary evidence suggests that when practiced regularly, tai chi may increase muscle strength and improve cardiovascular health, coordination and balance.”

#### **Tai Chi For Seniors**

Such attributes are important for all people, but especially for seniors because as we age, muscle strength, cardio health, coordination and balance decline. According to the National Institute on Aging, falls among older people constitute a serious public health problem. One out of three people aged 65 and older falls each year in the U.S. This results in more than \$12 billion in direct and indirect medical costs. But more importantly, it results in thousands of deaths. Of all deaths associated with falls, 60 percent involve people aged 75 years or older. Research shows that the most effective strategy to prevent falls among older people is physical activity to improve strength, mobility and flexibility. Enter tai chi.

“There are lots of exercises that help develop balance, such as strengthening exercises like pushing weights, but they aren’t focusing on the self. They are focusing externally, on the activity, not the individual,” stated Chris Bryhan, a physical therapist with the Performance Center of St. Michael Hospital at Brown Deer and a tai chi instructor. “With tai chi, the focus is internal; the focus is on finding your center and understanding how you relate to your environment. You’re not only becoming stronger and increasing your endurance, as in traditional exercise. You do all that, but with tai chi you also learn to see the body as a whole, not just a bunch of pieces,” he said. “You’re focusing the mind on the movements, and on being aware of what’s happening in the body, eventually making it more of a habit.” The value is that the principals of tai chi—like understanding your center of gravity--create a body memory and then translate into every day movements, such as how you walk, or get out of a chair, or recover from stepping onto a slippery surface.

In fact, researchers at Emory University School of Medicine found that older people taking part in a 15-week tai chi program reduced their risk of falling by 47.5 percent.

The fear of falling was also lessened. Before training, 23 percent of the tai chi participants said they feared falling. After their training, only eight percent still had such concerns.

Finnigan has definitely noticed a difference. She's been practicing tai chi for more than four years and has found it to be beneficial in many ways. "It's helped with my balance for sure. It's also made me more aware of my body in general—what moves and why it moves," she said. "It's also made me more aware of the present moment. You only have the moment you're in and if you can't stay in that, tension results. And tension can drive you nuts."

Finnigan was initially drawn to the exercise because she liked the look of the form. "It's a slow dance, a slow exercise, rather than pounding. High impact was not something I could do." She attends class once a week and practices the form every day for about 10 minutes. "Tai chi is much more than I thought it would be," she shared. "There are more assets to it than just being a pretty form."

### **Tai Chi Research**

The combination of slow, weight-bearing movements, deep breathing, and meditative mindset are part of what makes tai chi such an ideal exercise. Beyond balance, there are many other research-based health benefits of tai chi for seniors, including lowering blood pressure; improving mood states; reducing anxiety, stress hormones and depression; improving strength, mobility and endurance; assisting with joint disorders; delaying the decline of cardiorespiratory function and much more. Those with hip and knee replacements or back injuries are thankful for the gentleness of the exercise. Of course one doesn't need to have a condition to benefit—tai chi is an excellent preventive measure as well.

One of the most recent studies on the exercise was profiled in the September 2003 issue of *Psychosomatic Medicine*. Michael R Irwin, M.D., director of the Cousins Center for Psychoneuroimmunology at UCLA reported that tai chi boosts shingles immunity in elderly people. Shingles is a herpes virus that lies dormant in anyone who's had chicken pox. When a person's immunity dips, the virus revives and causes painful sores. Elderly people are at particular risk because of weakened immune systems.

Irwin studied 36 men and women age 60 and older. Half the people were assigned to a fifteen week program of tai chi chih—which is a simpler version of tai chi. The other half were put on a waiting list and asked to postpone starting any new meditation program for 15 weeks. "In the tai chi group, we saw a 50% increase in the immune cells that remember the shingles virus," Irwin told WebMD. "People really had a doubling or so of their immunity." Since the research was essentially testing overall immune memory and function, Irwin concludes that the findings of his shingles-specific research would apply to other infections.

### **Use It or Loose It**

“A moving gate never squeaks.” This proverb gives partial insight into why the Chinese are legendary for their longevity. For decades, the West has been scrutinizing Eastern cultures such as the Chinese to understand their recipe for life-long health. Keeping active is one of the ingredients.

“The Chinese have found that people need to keep movement throughout life,” said Patricia Corrigan Culotti, BSA, a Waukesha-based certified instructor of tai chi, ROM (Range of Motion) Dance and qi gong. Tai chi, she points out, “is a gentle, relaxed form of exercise that doesn’t wear you down. It’s one of the few exercises that those with injuries and inflexible bodies can do.”

### **What is Tai Chi?**

Tai chi, also known as tai chi chuan or taiji, is an ancient Chinese martial art form designed to enhance well-being on all levels: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Synchronizing breathing exercises with a series of physical postures that flow one into another through connecting transition moves creates slow, graceful, precise body movements. The series is known as “the form.”

It’s said that in the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Taoist priest Chang San Fang observed a crane fighting with a snake and compared their movements to the complementary opposites of yin and yang, which the Eastern view ascribes to being the two parts that make up every whole, including humans. Yin and yang can get out of balance when *chi*, the vital life source that flows throughout the body, becomes stagnated. According to Chinese medicine, when *chi* gets stuck and yin and yang are out of balance, illness results. With the intention of balancing our yin and yang attributes, and creating harmony between body and mind, the Taoist monks created the exercise of tai chi based on the movements of animals. With poetic names such as “stork cools wings,” strong imagery is invoked and reminds one of the origin of the exercises. The movements have been passed down through the generations and, over time, have branched off into different tai chi styles, including Chen, Sun, Wu and Yang.

In addition to Yang style, Culotti also teaches a form called Tai Chi Fundamentals. Developed by long-time tai chi practitioner and instructor Tricia Yu of Madison, WI and Jill Johnson, a physical therapist and geriatric clinical specialist at New England Center for Integrative Health, Tai Chi Fundamentals is a less-complex, modified version of tai chi that is particularly well-suited for seniors or those with physical limitations. For instance, the traditional tai chi form contains numerous foot pivots that can be challenging. Fundamentals eases into such movements. It’s also shorter—about three-five minutes, versus the traditional 10 minute form, so it’s easier to remember. “People get encouraged through the Fundamentals and then can go on to the traditional taiji form,” Culotti said.

An estimated 100 million people throughout the world practice tai chi on a regular basis. Although some call it a moving meditation, don’t think you’re not working. Tai chi is a low-impact aerobic workout that burns an average of 250-350 calories per hour.

“Because it’s so soft and easy-looking, people are amazed” at what a great workout it is, Culotti shared. “It’s an excellent workout and keeps you in good shape.”

She also emphasized that tai chi is for all people of all ages and at all physical levels. The form can be intensified with deeper bends or longer holds as well as lessened, depending on the needs and desired goals. An added bonus for anyone practicing tai chi: “You learn how not to burn up *chi* through all the stress and inefficient use of your body,” she stated. “You’ll find excess energy because you’re learning to use the body efficiently for any functional purpose.” She adds that tai chi “works energy through all the main meridians [the channels through which *chi* flows], acting as a tune up for your entire body if done regularly.”

And that is one of the keys to reaping the benefits of tai chi: regular practice. Like any other exercise, you actually have to do it to see the results. “It doesn’t have immediate results, although sometimes that does happen,” Culotti said. For instance, when she first started the exercise more than 20 years ago, within weeks Culotti found she needed less sleep due to using her body’s energy more efficiently. But overall, it takes time. “You have to give it time, patience, perseverance and practice,” she said. She advises taking a regular class and practicing three-five minutes a day in the beginning. “Keep it fun so that you want to do it each day,” she advises.

***Maggie Jacobus is a freelance writer living in Milwaukee. She is an Ordained Minister of Healing and a Holistic Lifestyle Coach.***