

*The Outpost Exchange*

**TAI CHI SIDEBAR**

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**TAI CHI: GETTING STARTED**

Although there are a number of videos and books on tai chi, it is highly recommended that you take a class to learn. It is critical to be properly aligned to gain the full benefit of the exercise as well as to avoid injury. An experienced instructor is well-trained to do just that. There are a number of tai chi centers and classes offered throughout southeastern Wisconsin. Most of the area's hospitals and community centers offer courses specifically geared to seniors.

There is no regimented certification for tai chi. It's important to have a good personal connection to the instructor, so you need to shop around to find a teacher who suits your needs. To find a good teacher, certified tai chi instructor Patricia Corrigan Culotti recommends the following:

- Ask the instructor about the lineage of the style they teach—they should be able to tell you the history of their style.
- Ask how long the instructor has been practicing. Culotti believes an effective teacher should be practicing for 5 years more.
- If you have specific health concerns, ask if they have experience working with students like you. A teacher should be knowledgeable about body mechanics so they can make sure students are properly aligned.
- Ask to view or participate in an introductory class or workshop so you can get a feel for the instructor's style. Does the personality resonate with you?

Culotti offered the following tips to prepare for class:

- Wear comfortable, loose clothing. You won't be breaking a sweat. (If you do, you're working too hard, she says. You want to conserve energy, not deplete it.)
- Wear flat, comfortable walking shoes. You need to be able to feel your feet connected to the floor. You can also go barefoot if you're comfortable with that.
- Try not to eat within an hour of class. But if you haven't eaten for several hours, be sure you grab something small 30 minutes or so before so you don't get dizzy. Wait for 60-90 minutes or so after class to eat, as the *chi* is still moving and you want to let it flow to maximize the effect.
- Even if you are sick or run-down, Culotti encourages you to come to class because it's an immune system-enhancing exercise. You can also just sit in the class if you are too unwell to participate. As a mind-body exercise, you can gain benefit just envisioning the movements as well as being in the energy of those doing it.

Two students of tai chi shared their advice on getting started. Sherrill Munson, 63, of Wauwatosa has been practicing tai chi for 18 months. She recommends that you “just try it. Don’t think you’re going to learn it in the first lesson, or a month or a year. But try it. And if you like it, keep with it. Don’t get discouraged. Even if you don’t feel you’re doing a lot of what the instructor is doing, you’re still getting benefit from it. Keep with it!”

Sally Finnigan, 62, also of Wauwatosa, has been practicing for more than 4 years. Her advice is that you “don’t worry about what’s wrong with your body; find out what’s right with it. Go to a session to see what it looks like. All this business about ‘Oh my back hurts.’ A good teacher is able to deal with that. I’ve seen people walk in on crutches” and the instructor has helped them.

Culotti points out that she has taught everyone from able bodied students to those with walkers and people in wheelchairs. “There’s almost no excuse that all seniors aren’t doing it,” she exclaimed.