

Tai Chi increases balance, flexibility, well being

By Betty Akiba

Maybe you've read about the many health benefits of Tai Chi—it's a total health package good for balance, flexibility, relaxation and mental focus. It lowers blood pressure, improves sleep and increases bone density. Studies regularly report that Tai Chi helps people prevent falls, recover from strokes and manage arthritis, Parkinson's and other neuro-muscular disorders. These days it is a rare doctor who will not encourage seniors and aging baby boomers to get involved with this type of exercise.

So you're convinced it's good for



Fun, easy exercise for seniors to learn.

you and maybe you've seen people doing the beautiful, flowing moves on television or in a local park. It looks easy, effortless—but how to get started? Let me tell you our story; maybe it will help.

Years ago my husband Joe and I signed up for Tai Chi classes—we weren't going to miss out on all those health benefits! We studied with a couple of different teachers and were fascinated by how gracefully they moved and how much they knew. But despite attending class regularly, we just couldn't remember the moves well enough to practice effectively at home. In addition, some of the moves involved kicks, fast turns or a lot of shoulder action that despite teacher warnings to "go at your own pace" made already sensitive joints complain. We learned a lot, but finally gave up and quit, disappointed that we had not learned a sequence of moves that we

could do on our own safely and comfortably. In the years since then, we heard this same story from others. Unlike the Chinese, most of us did not grow up doing Tai Chi. It was like learning to swim or ride a bicycle in your 50's—a whole different ballgame than when you learn to move like that as a child.

And so it's not surprising that the number of "short forms" and classes specifically designed for seniors began to grow. When we next had the opportunity to study Tai Chi we knew we had found what we were looking for. The Tai Chi for Health series (also known as Tai Chi for Arthritis and Tai Chi for Balance) is a sequence of 12 movements taken from the 73-movement Sun (pronounced soong) style, one of the five major Tai Chi styles. This series of moves, and the very effective way in which they are taught, was developed by Dr. Paul Lam and a team of medical and Tai Chi experts. Because the series eliminates dangerous or overly challenging moves, it has been officially approved by Arthritis Foundations around the world. Most important, this short version is taught in a way that most people can remember and practice on their own.

As movement educators at the Duke Center for Living in Ferrington, we introduced the Tai Chi for Balance program last September. Since that time, over 150 people have participated in the small instructional classes which are taught in a 6-week series. In Part

1, students learn about the principles of Tai Chi and how to do movements 1-5, learning a new move each week. In Part 2, they learn movements 6-12. Research has shown that these 12 movements alone, practiced 5-10 minutes daily can make a significant difference in overall health and balance. But because the movements are fun and feel good, students who wanted to learn more can do so.

The following comment by Linda Grimm, a Tai Chi for Balance student, is consistent with recent research results at UNC-Chapel Hill indicating that improvements in concentration while moving is a key to good balance:

"In the beginning I thought the movements looked so graceful and so powerful. They looked easy, like they took little effort. But when I tried to learn them, I couldn't believe how jerky my own movements were, how clumsy I felt and how I couldn't remember even the simplest moves. We had handouts and even CDs to use at home so I practiced 5-10 minutes a day like they suggested. Each week we learned a new move and even though the moves got more complex, they became easier to learn and to remember. It was like my mind and body began to focus and cooperate. My mind learned where my body was in space and I felt more balanced both physically and mentally."

Betty Akiba, PhD, and her husband Joe Strain are Certified Tai Chi for Arthritis instructors and Feldenkrais teachers at the Duke Center for Living Health and Fitness at Ferrington. Classes are open to members and non-members. For more information please 545.2133.

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