

Nurturing Body and Mind

Program Aims to Bring Tai Chi to Older Adults

By Jean Van Ryzin

For more than 300 years, people in China have practiced the ancient art of Taijiquan, more commonly known in the West as Tai Chi. Based on Chinese philosophies that advocate for health, vitality and longevity, Tai Chi is a unique combination of flowing movements and quiet meditation that researchers are now discovering has the power to significantly improve quality of life—physically, mentally and spiritually.

In a growing body of clinical trials, scientists are finding this is especially true for older adults. Studies have proven that Tai Chi can help seniors improve everything from their balance and blood pressure to their sleeping, strength and ability to handle pain. Even more profound for many older adults is

the deepened sense of spirituality and relaxation they say they gain from the exercise.

“I feel empowered to live a longer time. I feel I have the energy.” This and the quotes throughout this article come from older adults who learned the art of Tai Chi from

“To learn something when you are in your late 70s that you can use for however long you happen to live ... what greater gift could you expect?”

Master Yang Yang, a Tai Chi expert who has been researching its benefits among seniors as a doctoral candidate at the University of



Practicing outdoors, these Wisconsin older adults are all Tai Chi instructors in their communities.

Illinois. He is also author of the book *Taijiquan: The Art of Nurturing, The Science of Power*.

“Taiji is simple to learn, low-impact, provides a range of movements to gradually improve, doesn’t need any equipment and can be practiced anywhere,” Yang said. “It offers a broad scope of benefits, including feelings of tranquility and happiness.” Tai Chi also is adaptable for people at all physical levels—from active, independent seniors to those using walkers and wheelchairs.

Yang is part of a national panel of experts who met late last year to discuss how his work and that of others can be translated into effective Tai Chi programs for seniors in the community. Last year, the Archstone Foundation provided funding to the National Council on Aging, National Blueprint Office at the University of Illinois and Institute of Integral Qigong and Tai Chi to craft a model, evidence-based Tai Chi program for seniors that local aging service organizations can implement. The goal is to pilot the project in two locations next year.

What Is Tai Chi?

Tai Chi was born from the Chinese martial arts, but it is not militaristic. One of the purposes of practice is to bring participants into the present moment and help them learn to relax and focus their mind and body.

Traditional Tai Chi practice includes three major components, explained Wojtek Chodzko-Zajko, head of the Department of Kinesiology at the University of Illinois, and a member of the expert panel:

- **Qi Gong**, which is the quiet, meditative component done standing or sitting. “Qi” is translated to mean a person’s “vital energy” or “life force.” “Gong” refers to the constant advancement toward realizing inner tranquility through continual practice of Tai Chi’s fundamental skills.
- **Tai Chi Forms**, which are a set of choreographed slow, flowing movements.
- **Push-Hands**, which is two-person balance, strength and reaction training.

As part of Qi Gong, participants learn to relax their bodies, breathe deeply and release their worries and tensions. By practicing Tai Chi forms, participants improve their postural control and balance, flexibility, coordination, agility, strength, sensitivity, reaction time and confidence. Push-Hands is a component that is not commonly used with older adults.

“Tai Chi is not just physical—there’s also a mind-body component,” explained Tricia Yu, director of Tai Chi Health, Madison, WI, and a member of the expert panel. “You focus on what you’re doing at the time, with a peaceful, accepting perspective. It’s about coming into the present moment.”

The Benefits of Tai Chi

While Tai Chi has been practiced for hundreds of years, it is only recently that researchers have begun to document its positive effects, particularly in the lives of older adults.

By conducting studies in which one group of seniors is taught Tai Chi over several months and another is not, researchers have been able to prove that Tai Chi can help older adults reduce their risk of falls by

improving their balance and flexibility; enhance their lower-body muscle strength; reduce pain and stiffness in joints due to arthritis; reduce blood pressure; improve sleep; and reduce depression and anxiety.

Yang discovered many of these effects in his three studies with seniors aged 62-97. In one, seniors who practiced Tai Chi for one hour three times a week for only two months significantly improved their lower body strength and balance—key components to reducing falls. After six months, they reported multi-dimensional benefits that included enhanced self-esteem, happiness and feelings of peace.

“Participation in Taiji has affected every area of my life,” said one older woman in Yang’s study. “To me, Taiji is spiritual, it’s emotional, it’s psychological. I mean it affects all of those, and it’s physical.”

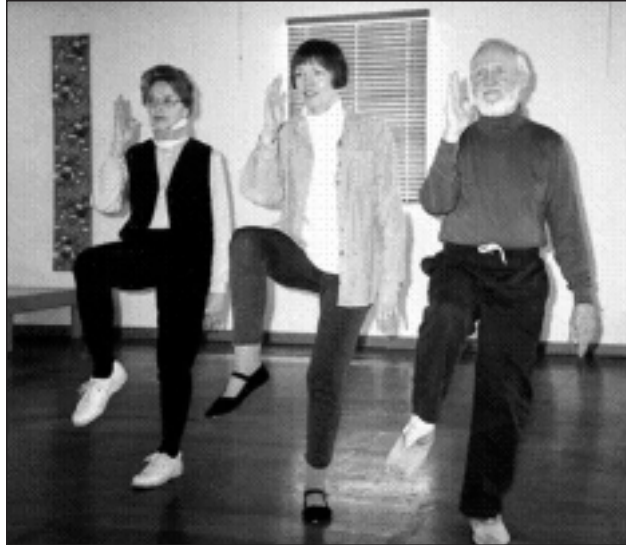
Translating Research into Practice

The goal of the Archstone Foundation grant is to translate these research findings into an innovative, evidence-based Tai Chi program that can be “diffused” or disseminated to community-based aging service organizations.

“While there have been studies to evaluate the impact of Tai Chi, they have all been very rigidly controlled,” explained the University of Illinois’ Chodzko-Zajko. “There has been no translational study in which real employees in a community organization implement a Tai Chi program and test its effectiveness.”

The objective of the grant is to develop a toolkit providing step-by-step instructions to help local organizations establish a Tai Chi program. It will include a model curriculum for older adults, as well as information on how to select and train an instructor, how to recruit participants and how to evaluate and measure the program’s results.

The expert panel is now finalizing a consensus document and plans to launch two pilot projects next year in hand-selected aging service organizations—one in Illinois and one in California, Chodzko-Zajko said.



Seniors enrolled in Tricia Yu’s Tai Chi Fundamentals class in Madison, WI, demonstrate an advanced move called “golden pheasant stands on one leg.”

Overcoming Challenges

In developing the program, experts are looking at ways to overcome barriers. Among them are potential confusion and misperceptions about Tai Chi, obstacles to finding qualified Tai Chi trainers and debates on how to best measure outcomes.

“I feel more upbeat ... more optimistic ... I’m more hopeful. I upped my lifespan from 80 to 100. How’s that?!”

“While there is a tremendous interest in Tai Chi all over the country, many people are still confused and believe it has a religious connotation,” Chodzko-Zajko said. “We need to let people know that it is a form of physical activity and relaxation.”

In his work with older adults, Yang said he found it most effective to start by concentrating on the physical benefits of Tai Chi. “That is the primary factor in recruiting people,” he explained. “I didn’t talk about the underlying philosophy or culture at first.”

PHOTO BY BENNY LAPID



Tai Chi Master Yang Yang leads a group of seniors in a Tai Chi class as part of his research study into the effects the exercise program can have on older adults' health and well-being.

When it comes to teacher training and qualifications, the consensus is that Tai Chi's very basic fundamentals can be taught to most professionals who are skilled in physical exercise, fitness, movement or physical or occupational therapy. The pilot projects will

“When I talk to people, I say, ‘I’ve started Taiji, and it’s changed my life.’”

look at developing a network of facilitators or lay leaders who can attend intensive training sessions in Tai Chi basics and then follow the suggested curriculum.

The panel also is identifying the most effective means for organizations to measure

outcomes. In addition to basic functional tests for balance, leg strength and activities of daily living, these will likely include quality of life and life satisfaction measures and participants' willingness to stick to the program. Experts agree that the most benefit comes from continued practice.

The program will encourage organizations to partner with others in their community, as well, to enhance the effectiveness of their Tai Chi program.

Proven Techniques

Already, Tai Chi is becoming more familiar to seniors in some parts of the country.

In Eugene, OR, the Oregon Research Institute is using a grant from the Centers for Disease Control to create an implementation package to help senior centers run an evidence-based Tai Chi falls prevention pro-

gram. The package includes an instructors' manual, video and users' guide. In pilot projects this year, the institute will be studying how many senior centers and older adults are interested in such a program and how effectively it can be implemented, said Fuzhong Li, a researcher on the project.

In Wisconsin, Tricia Yu has been teaching Tai Chi to older adults for more than 30 years. Based on her experience at her Tai Chi Center, she worked with physical and occupational therapists to develop two programs specifically for the senior population—Tai Chi Fundamentals and ROM Dance.

ROM (Range of Motion) Dance integrates the mind/body and movement principles of Tai Chi with exercises usually recommended

by doctors and therapists for rheumatoid arthritis. It can be performed sitting or standing, and movements are accompanied by quiet music and verse. Tai Chi Fundamentals provides a clear, systematic approach for mastering Tai Chi basics that builds from simple to complex patterns of movement. It is easily adaptable to people of all abilities.

Over the years, Yu has trained dozens of movement instructors, fitness experts and physical therapists in how to use these programs with older adults, and has taught many seniors herself through partnerships with local area agencies on aging, senior centers and retirement communities. "The aging network is very open to this," she said. "There seems to be an enthusiasm about it." ♦



Seniors practice two fundamental components of Tai Chi—Qi Gong, or quiet meditation (left) and Tai Chi Forms (below), which are choreographed slow, flowing movements.



PHOTOS BY ALICE DODDS