

Tai Chi Community Comment: Mike Goldsby, March 8, 2018

You may have seen people practicing the Chinese Martial Art called Tai Chi or seen pictures of older Chinese people in the park, all moving slowly and in unison. That's Tai Chi.

You see a lot of older people doing Tai Chi. It is a gentle form of exercise that is accessible to older folks. But the Chinese also link it to longevity. And there are plenty of older folks doing Tai Chi to attest to that.

I was recently fortunate to get certified as a Tai Chi instructor, thanks to the Ferndale Senior Resource Agency and the Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services – Public Health. Three of us; Ann Barbata, Barbara Perra and myself, lead a group in Ferndale Thursdays from 5 to 6 p.m. at the Community Center. The classes are free. There are other Tai Chi groups in our county. Several gyms have Tai Chi classes. Other communities like Fortuna and Blue Lake do as well. Public Health plans to start some new groups in the Spring.

So at my gym, In Light Fitness in Ferndale, our workout classes focus on aerobics and weight training. Get that heart rate up. Get a sweat going. Sustain some effort and push a little. This is very important for physical and emotional health.

Tai Chi is so different. The movements are slow, fluid, gentle. If you have arthritis or limited mobility, you only move as far as is comfortable. The benefit is not measured by the number of reps or the increase in heart rate.

The origins of Tai Chi go back to legends of ancient times, the teachings of Confucius, around 400 B.C. There are many different schools, stretched across many centuries, with many true Masters of the art. I can't do the topic justice with my Instructor Certificate and 3 minutes of air time.

The philosophy of Tai Chi intrigues me. It relates to the forces of YIN and YANG, polar opposites yet held in balance. Tai Chi develops internal strength, through proper body alignment, loosening of joints and relaxed muscles. The body alignment and breathing relieve stress of the body and the mind.

Some talk about energy flow, acupuncture points, meridians. But Dr. Paul Lam, teacher and founder of the Tai Chi for Health Institute, maintains you do not have to believe in that to derive health benefits from the regular practice of Tai Chi.

Dr. Lam has studied the effects of Tai Chi since the mid 90s, joined by the Centers for Disease Control, the Arthritis Foundation and others. Tai Chi is commonly called “meditation in motion” but Harvard Researchers nicknamed it “medication in motion” for the health benefits, especially for seniors. They recommended Tai Chi as an adjunct treatment for many of the problems associated with aging. Tai Chi can be done seated or by people in wheelchairs.

These measurable benefits include lowering blood pressure, lowering cholesterol and lowering the perception of stress. Because Tai Chi improves balance, it is useful in decreasing the incidence of falls for seniors.

Like the old Chinese proverb: “The bamboo that bends is stronger than the oak that resists.”

This is Mike Goldsby for Community Comment.