

Increase energy via balanced movement

by Robert Seidenberg

Beth Meyer, a rheumatoid arthritis sufferer, has received injections and been on various forms of medicine for nearly three decades, trying to control the pain and inflammation in her joints.

Then in 1998, after her blood platelet count dropped dangerously low, Mrs. Meyer found out she also has systemic lupus — like rheumatoid arthritis, an autoimmune disease which over the long run can sap one's strength.

Between the two maladies, on bad days, says Mrs. Meyer, "I feel like I'm dragging an elephant through a swamp. That's the best description I can come up with because it's so debilitating."

Struggling with illness throughout much of her 57 years, she has always sought out activities that are within her physical capabilities and that hold emotional and spiritual benefits, too, she says.

For a while, she tried yoga, which she enjoyed, "but there were many postures I couldn't do," she says.

Then, about two and half years ago while attending a women's resource fair, Mrs. Meyer ran into Arlene Faulk, a teacher of tai chi, a series of gentle movements based on Chinese medicine and martial arts practice dating back centuries.

Ms. Meyer, looking for a tai chi class at the time, spoke with Ms. Faulk, and after learning about her own health challenges and how she had overcome them, felt inspired to take classes taught by Ms. Faulk.

"I went and immediately felt that tai chi was something I could easily incorporate into my life," says Mrs. Meyer, a teacher by profession.

Tai chi is becoming quite popular these days, particularly among older adults who favor its gentle fluid movements over a high intensity step aerobics class or a bout with a treadmill. This exercise discipline stresses correct posture, concentration and harmony of movements. Tai chi involves performing a set sequence of movements like a special dance that lasts eight minutes or more. Each movement is done slowly, alternating between "gathering-in" movements accompanied by breathing in, and "outward projecting" movements accompanied by breathing out.

Tai Chi history

The specially choreographed movements originated in about the 12th century A.D. However, cave paintings indicate that similar exercise systems were practiced as early as 3000 B.C. According to ancient scholars, the movements open up "energy channels" within the body.

The Arthritis Foundation (the largest private, nonprofit contributor to arthritis research) issued a state-

ment concluding that, while Western doctors may raise an eyebrow at the theory behind tai chi exercises, many nonetheless recommend them for anyone with arthritis and related diseases, especially seniors.

"These slow, gentle movements build muscle strength without stressing joints, improve balance and relieve depression," the statement notes.

A 2003 study by researchers at UCLA's Neuropsychiatric Institute found older adults who took a form of exercise called tai chi chih three times a week showed an increase in the cells providing immunity against varicella zoster virus, or shingles, as well as improvement in overall health.

Based on responses to a questionnaire, the study found that "subjects in the tai chi group generally reported feelings of relaxation, increased energy and less fatigue." The UCLA researchers are now undertaking new studies examining tai chi's ability to help people better cope with rheumatoid arthritis.

Jennifer Pike, one of the researchers on the shingles study, says the benefits researchers are finding may not be exclusive to tai chi. However, there is a high dropout rate with other forms of exercises. Tai chi appears to be a form of exercise to which people migrate more easily.

"They like it, it is fun," she says, noting that the soft fluid movements may be especially suitable for older adults. There are at least five separate kinds of tai chi exercise, and older people may have to try several to find the one that best suits their physical limitations.

Tina Schmidt-McNulty, M.S., exercise physiology, says that the average age of participants in the tai chi classes she teaches is 65. One class member is 94.

She says improving balance and increasing energy are key motivators for people who take her class. "You have to keep your mind open to things beyond the movements when doing tai chi," she says, comparing the process to the current that runs through a light bulb.

"When you're doing tai chi you're working on that current and keeping everything turned on."

Arlene Faulk has been able to draw



Arlene Faulk (right) teaches Tai Chi techniques to Beth Meyer (right) and Else-Britt DeLong (back) in Evanston. Pictured below is Laura Allen-Simpson (front). (Photos by Jean Clough)

on her own experiences in the classes she teaches in Chicago and Evanston.

Struck down by MS

Faulk, 57, had an important corporate job but was challenged continually by symptoms of multiple sclerosis. Finally in 1991 symptoms were so severe that she had trouble standing up, forcing her to take a leave of absence from work.

As a result, she went in a matter of years from a "very, very active life in a high-level job with lots of responsibility, to a point where I was lying on my couch, not being able to plan for the next day."

After many years of traditional treatments, she started seeing an acupuncturist who, in the course of the treatment, suggested that Ms. Faulk explore tai chi.

Ms. Faulk began taking classes at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago. While initially unable to do all the movements, she remembers the calming feeling she experienced just by doing what she could.

Using a set of exercises learned in class, she practiced diligently over four years, essentially relearning balance techniques for standing and walking.

"It's called intentional walking," she says. "You stand with your feet hip-width apart and your knees are slightly bent. You shift weight to one leg, and then you step forward with the other foot."

Working through the different movements also brought another benefit. "I learned to be very patient," she says. "So I didn't put any time lines that a year from now I wanted to be at a certain point."

Seven years ago Ms. Faulk began teaching tai chi, including some classes geared specifically for people with arthritis.

To acquire expertise, she received certification in a program called "Tai Chi for Arthritis" developed by Dr. Paul Lam, a family physician in Australia. The program, which is endorsed by the Arthritis Foundation, is designed to move the joints and ligaments in a very gentle way. In her classes in Chicago and Evanston, Ms. Faulk starts off with breathing and preparatory exercises, focusing on intentionally moving energy through the body.

She faces the class, four women, including Beth Meyer, as they work wordlessly, following Faulk's lead with graceful precise movements. In contrast to the music thumping in the background at a health club, the only sound in the room at times is the women moving and the whirring of fans.

"It's a beautiful form of exercise," says Ms. Meyer. "My body feels toned and balanced. I'm not worried about anything. I just focus on the movements themselves and there's such beauty and peace."

She knows that while her illnesses won't go away, after doing tai chi for half an hour she feels a sense of balance and new energy in her life. For the time being, "I feel I can dump that elephant to the side of the road and don't have to drag him home with me."

To learn more about tai chi classes endorsed by the Arthritis Foundation, call 1-312-372-2080 or visit the foundation's Website at www.arthritis.org. Ms. Faulk's website is www.grotto.com/TaiChi.

