

Moving Meditation

Standing strong amid the 30-mph winds gusting through Washington Park, a group of 20 Tai Chi practitioners plants their feet, centers their energy and extends their arms in a slow, rhythmic motion.

“Move your hands like clouds,” says Curt Brewer, a brown belt in Kung Fu and Tai Chi who leads the Beijing form on World Tai Chi and Qigong Day.

Although the late April temperature hovers just above 40 degrees, the group is not deterred. They lunge back and gracefully push the air in front of them; connecting the mind and body.

“You come here tired and build up energy as you go,” says student Linda Sciacca. “Working with the chi [body’s life energy], learning to help myself and working with the movement is just phenomenal.”

Tai Chi is a 2,000-year-old Chinese martial art that works to improve the flow of internal energy within the body. It originates from the legend of Chang San Feng. As the story goes, Feng was captivated by watching a snake avoid a crane attack by twisting around in graceful, controlled movements. These became the 13 original postures, which have expanded to 108 movements today.

“Tai Chi is about learning to flow with the constant change in life,” says Cynthia Ghiron who has taught Tai Chi and Qigong in Denver and Boulder for more than 20 years. “It’s a moving meditation designed to quiet and still the body and the mind.” The exercise is done in a series of sequential movements performed in a steady, flowing manner. As students strive to maintain physical balance, Tai Chi works to balance the yin and yang—the opposing forces within the body. “Learning the sequence of the moves takes time,” Ghiron says. “It also takes time to let go of the tensions and holding patterns in the body and to become supple and flexible.”

Tai Chi is a form of Qigong—a healing art rooted in traditional Chinese medicine. There are thousands of forms of Qigong, all of which integrate postures, breathing techniques and mental focus.

According to traditional Chinese medicine, when the body’s energy or chi flows freely, optimal health is achieved. Stress, emotional trauma and physical injuries may cause blockages that can lead to poor health, says Debra Takara, a Denver Qigong healer and teacher. But Tai Chi

works to un-

block for 25 minutes you’re not worried about anything else because you can’t be.”

In search of a cheaper alternative to skiing, Thane Rockwell decided to try the Chinese martial art. “The thing I like most about [Tai Chi] is the precision. You’re learning how to hit and where to hit,” he says. “I don’t have to go fast to beat someone.”

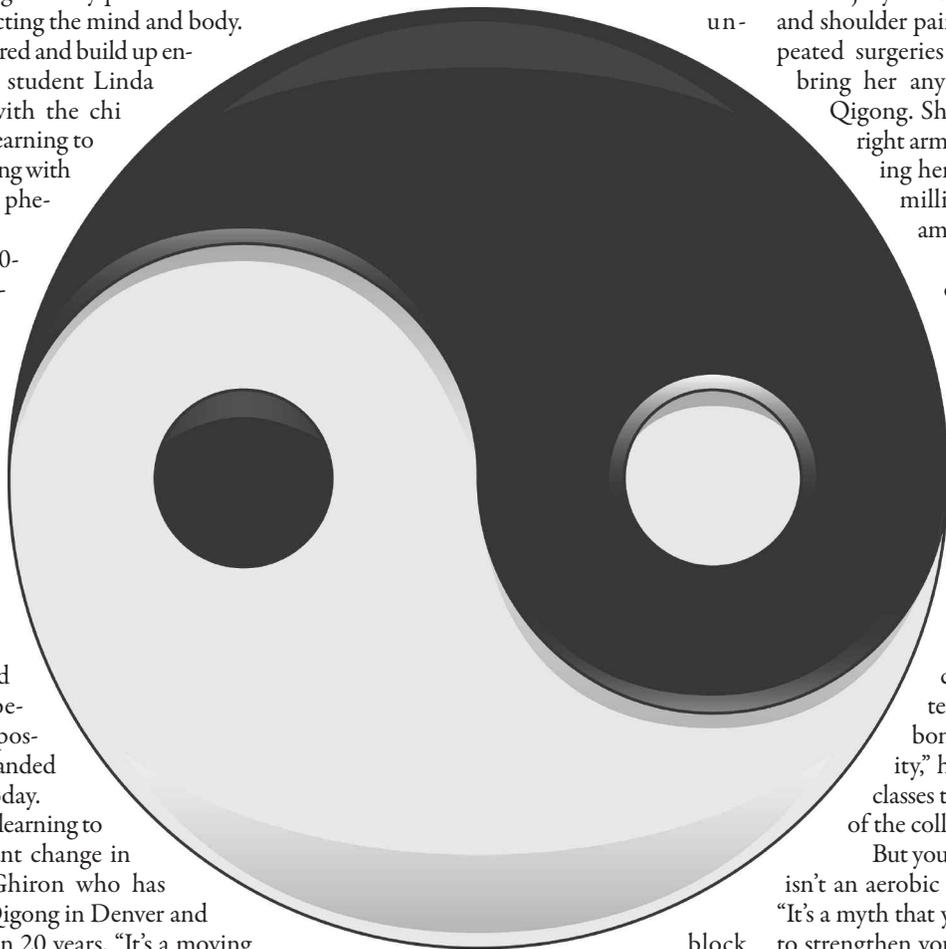
The different aspects of Tai Chi—health and exercise, culture, meditation, martial arts— attract people from all walks of life. A work-related injury left Sciacca with severe neck, back and shoulder pain for almost two decades. Repeated surgeries and numerous shots didn’t bring her any relief. Then Sciacca began Qigong. She has regained the use in her right arm and experiences less pain during her daily activities. “I’m doing a million times better and it’s just amazing,” Sciacca says.

Because Tai Chi is so gentle on the bones and muscles, it’s often recommended for the elderly to keep their joints healthy and flexible. A Tai Chi instructor and faculty member at the University of Denver’s Institute of Gerontology, Joseph Brady has spent years researching aging and physical activity. Older people who practice Tai Chi function at a much younger level, Brady has discovered. “Their balance is better, their strength is better, their bone density, their aerobic capacity,” he says. “I have 90-year-olds in classes that can run rings around some of the college kids.”

But younger folks who believe Tai Chi isn’t an aerobic workout should think twice. “It’s a myth that you have to move fast in order to strengthen your heart,” Brady says. “Instead of throwing your body around, Tai Chi goes slow; really working the muscle groups.”

But the benefits of this moving meditation aren’t confined to the studio. All activities can be performed with a sense of mindfulness, Ghiron believes. “Tai Chi is a way of life—living with moment-to-moment awareness so that you can wake up Tai Chi, sleep Tai Chi, eat Tai Chi,” she says. “It is going with the flow of life.”

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block the body’s energy lines and allow the chi to circulate. Many students are attracted to the emotional balance generated from the practice.

John Plessinger began the meditative exercise last year when he noticed his body growing stiff. Since then, Tai Chi has become more than a limbering tool to enhance his golf game. “It gives you a feeling of being centered...more of a peace of mind,” Plessinger says. “When you do a