Tai Chi master researches 'medicine in motion'

Shin Lin stands in his office at UC Irvine performing "cloud hands," a popular Tai Chi movement that involves moving both arms in a rhythmic cycle, up above the head and back down to the chest.

"I just imagine I'm on the beach and the surf is coming up on the sand," said Lin. "Just focus on that rather than your troubles."

As he begins to meditate, his movements mimic the ebb and flow of ocean waves.

"Tai Chi is good for you," Shin said. "It will slow your heart rate and reduce your blood pressure."

Lin, a UC Irvine professor and faculty member for the Susan Samueli Center for Integrative Medicine, is considered a Tai Chi master. For more than a decade, he has been conducting research on health benefits associated with Tai Chi at the Laboratory for Mind/Body Signaling and Energy Research at UC Irvine.

Tai Chi is a form of Chinese martial arts that is practiced for self-defense training and meditation. It is a combination of hard, soft, fast and slow movements that increase one's endurance, balance and strength. The ultimate goal of Tai Chi is to create perfect harmony of mind and body. It is also said that one's "qi" (pronounced chEE), or "vital energy," will increase while practicing Tai Chi.

Lin has found that practicing Tai Chi increases blood flow and circulation and can prove beneficial for those suffering from hypertension and anxiety disorders. Research has found that Tai Chi can increase focus and brain activity and promote a healthy lifestyle, he said. It has also been used to help treat those with Parkinson's disease, Fibromyalgia, arthritis and diabetes.

"If you're going to do one kind of exercise it should be Tai Chi," said Lin. "It is a complete exercise: mind, body, muscle, tendons – everything."

Lin is classically trained in Chen family style Tai Chi. As a boy growing up in China he took up various forms of martial arts before honing his skills in Tai Chi to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Tai Chi has significant health benefits because it utilizes a wide variety of muscles in the body, said Lin.

"One of the major benefits shown by a controlled group trial is that (Tai Chi) could decrease falls, particularly in elderly," he said.

Falls are the second leading cause of accidental death in the world, according to the World Health Organization. Having a fall can lead to a downward spiral of health from which many elderly cannot recover, said Lin.

Lin's research has found that side leg muscles are used twice as much in Tai Chi compared to walking. This is significant because the side leg muscles act as stabilizers and can prevent falls, he said.

The benefits of Tai Chi go beyond stimulating physical health because it can improve one's ability to focus, he
"You're sharpening your mind by focusing on just one thing," he said. "With meditation training, people do a lot better."

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