Good Vibrations

For many stressed-out people, tai chi is like poetry in motion

By: Kelly James-Enger

Life with lupus can be stressful. Sometimes it feels like the most basic tasks take forever: balancing the checkbook, going grocery shopping, commuting to work or picking up the kids from school. It's almost like you're moving in slow motion.

Fortunately, there's at least one stress-relieving technique that actually requires you to move in slow motion. Enter tai chi (ty-CHEE), an ancient form of self-defense first practiced in China thousands of years ago. Today, more and more people–with chronic illnesses and without–are practicing the Eastern art form. But the focus has shifted from physical protection to inner peace.

Inner Kung Fu

"There are already some data suggesting that tai chi reduces stress and anxiety," says Dr. Chenchen Wang, assistant professor of Medicine at Tufts University School of Medicine, who believes that future studies will confirm what the Eastern world has believed for years. That is, tai chi is good for our health. Many studies have shown that regular exercise helps reduce stress, ward off depression and keep us strong, both physically and mentally. Even though tai chi is much gentler on joints than many other forms of exercise, it too packs quite a punch.

"Tai chi is an internal kung fu," says Dr. Zhi Gang Sha, a master-level tai chi instructor and author of *Power Healing: The Four Keys to Healing Your Body, Mind & Spirit*. "When used for self-defense, tai chi movements are powerful and fast. But tai chi for health uses slow movements to build energy and promote healing." This is good news for people with lupus, who frequently experience fatigue and joint discomfort. Unlike some of the more intense martial arts, tai chi can be safely practiced by nearly anyone. "I have had the pleasure of studying tai chi for a number of years," says Cindy Coney, an LFA board member and executive director of the Mendez Foundation in Tampa, Florida. "As a person with lupus, I have found that after a tai chi session, I am more relaxed and my energy is restored."

The Mind-Body Connection

Tai chi involves a series of slow, graceful movements through various positions with poetic names like "waving hand in the cloud." The movements are easy to learn–and can be done virtually anywhere. All are performed while standing, but accommodations can be made for people with limited mobility. While aiming for perfect form, practitioners also focus on rhythmic breathing and meditative thinking.

According to traditional Chinese medicine, sickness is caused by the blockage of chi, or vital energy. Tai chi aims to eliminate those blockages and let the chi flow, which is why it has been used for centuries. In addition to improving people's overall sense of well-being, tai chi appears to have physical benefits as well. "Tai chi increases flexibility, loosens your muscles, and

relieves pain and discomfort," says Dr. Sha. That's why many experts recommend the practice for people with some musculoskeletal conditions.

Recent studies indicate that tai chi also may help lower blood pressure and keep your heart healthy. Its weight-bearing qualities may help stimulate bone growth and strengthen connective tissue. And since tai chi consistently requires shifting the body's weight back and forth, it also improves balance. That translates into fewer falls–a whopping 47.5 percent fewer, according to a 1996 study where seniors practiced tai chi for 15 weeks. And fewer falls means fewer fractures, a great benefit for people with lupus who are at risk for thinning bones and osteoporosis.

Beginner's Luck

There are many different styles of tai chi. Some have as few as 24 moves; others have more than 100. Beginners or people with joint problems should inquire about Yang or Sun styles, which are gentle and easy to learn. Chen tai chi should be reserved for athletic types who can jump, kick and punch. **Whichever style you try, ask your doctor first**. Then seek out a reputable instructor at your local YMCA, gym or community center. If you have lupus or another health condition, tell your teacher. Then take a deep breath and let your chi flow.

This article is reprinted with permission of the Lupus Foundation of America, Inc. from Lupus Now, Fall 2003. Copyright 2003. All rights reserved.