

An Ancient Approach to Good Health

It was about 20 years ago that NEA-Retired member Cynthia Fels first became curious about Tai Chi, the ancient Chinese martial art that is said to help relieve stress and lessen the symptoms of several illnesses. When she retired in 2000, after a 27-year career as an elementary reading specialist, and moved from Wentzville, Missouri, to coastal California, she finally had the chance to marry her two passions: teaching and Tai Chi.

"I really missed teaching and having students," the 55-year-old Fels says. "I found that if I put my learning style principles to work in my Tai Chi instruction, it enhanced my students' instruction."

Fels and many other practitioners swear by Tai Chi as being a veritable panacea—especially for the older population. She lists an increase in balance, building immunity for cancer patients, and getting rid of shingles among the practice's benefits. In addition, she points out that the slow, methodical movements provide a decent cardiovascular workout. "An hour of Tai Chi is equal to walking a brisk three-mile walk. People don't realize that," Fels says. "Of course, in China they've known that for thousands of years."

Ramel Rones, a Boston-based Tai Chi expert who serves as a scientific consultant of mind-body therapies at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, admits there has been a lack of methodical research on the benefits of Tai Chi, but he has enough anecdotal evidence to make him a true believer.

For people with cancer, he says "[Tai Chi] empowers them. I've seen a lot of patients who have high red blood cell counts, who shouldn't be able to go up the stairs, but they're still active."

Rones, who helps people with cancer and arthritis as well as those dealing with aging, injuries, and stress, feels that Tai Chi keeps the mind sharp because of the concentration required. Indeed, it's among the activities that the Alzheimer's Association recommends to stave off that disease.

"You [also] help the joints by keeping all the other parts healthy," he says, explaining that Tai Chi improves people's quality of life and their immune systems.

While it may be difficult to believe that any form of exercise can cure everything but the common cold (and maybe even that!), the point is to keep an open mind.

Luckily, that's all anyone needs to get started with tai chi, according to Fels.

"That's what's great about Tai Chi," she says. "You don't really need anything special—a beginners mind and nice, loose clothing that doesn't restrict their flow of chi. It's not like golf, where you have to go buy all this stuff."

Fels teaches a type of Tai Chi developed by Dr. Paul Lam. One reason she appreciates his style is that it's easier on students than traditional methods that require more moves for their routines, called forms.

"He designed these shorter forms based on major styles of

Tai Chi," she says. "Some people don't want to learn the really long forms like I do. . . .

Some of them have 108 moves, and that's difficult for people unless they really like Tai Chi."

She says the style she practices was specifically designed for seniors, for whom balance can be trickier.

"Tai Chi for Arthritis is based on the sun style," Fels says. "Dr. Lam developed it using higher stances that are easier on the joints so people won't hurt their knees. It's characterized by steps that are good for balance. Seniors like that a lot better."

In addition to the health aspects and being back at the head of the class, Fels thrives on the camaraderie that develops among her and the students.

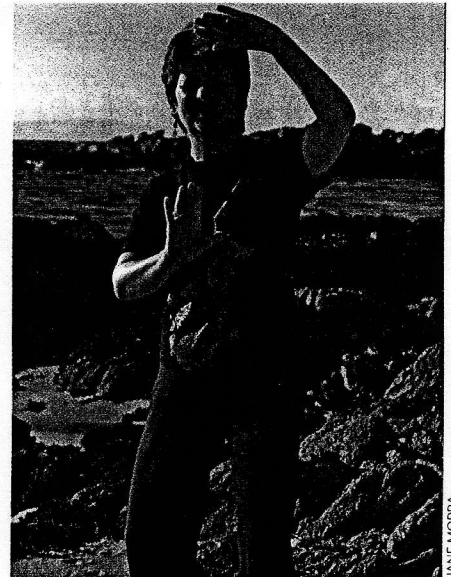
"My classes become a Tai Chi family," she says. "People know each other and practice together, and sometimes we have tea breaks, so that's fun."

She also likes the feeling of being one with nature, and the relaxation of practicing what she calls a moving meditation. "You're in that moment and doing your Tai Chi and everything else kind of disappears," she says. "You feel one with the Earth, especially if you practice outside."

And best of all, she gets to share her passion while fulfilling her desire to teach.

"It feels wonderful to have students again and to know that I am making a difference in their lives by giving them the lifelong gift of health and Tai Chi," Fels says.

—Rina Rapuano



As a Tai Chi instructor, Cynthia Fels enjoys having students again.

JANE MORBA

Quick Tips

SEE FOR YOURSELF

Cynthia Fels has this advice for people who would like to try Tai Chi:

Classes—"Look at senior centers in your area. The Tai Chi Productions Web site (www.taichiproductions.com), which lists all Tai Chi instructors in the country. Also, check with your local hospitals."

Books and DVDs—She also recommends Tai Chi For Health DVDs and books, written by Dr. Lam, and Ramel Rones' book and DVD *Sunrise Tai Chi*. All of these can be found online at amazon.com.