

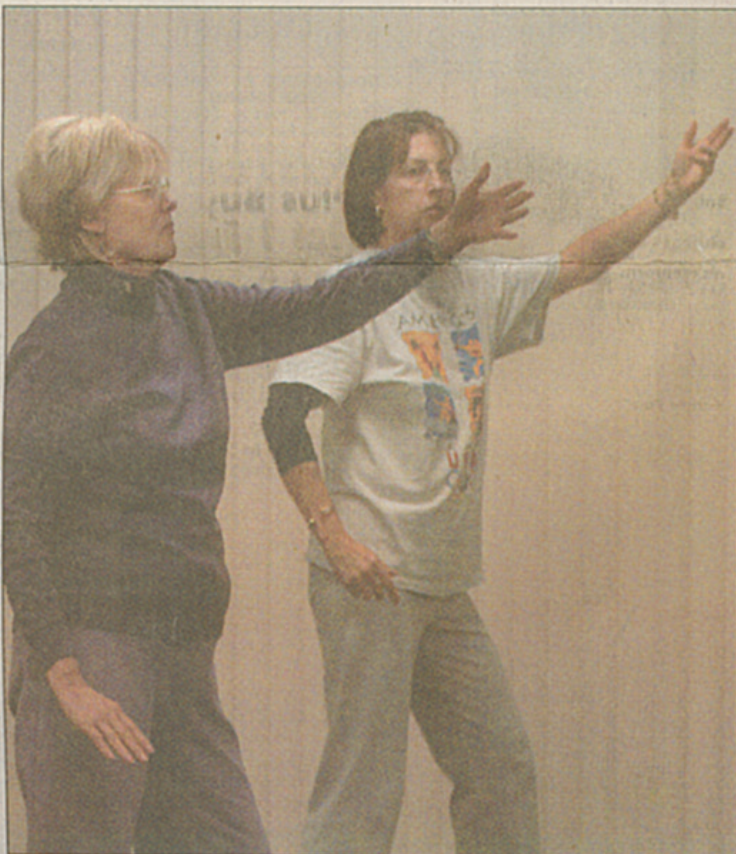


Express-Times photos/KEN WHITE

Tai chi master Ping Zhao of Bethlehem, right, leads a class through a tai chi movement at Northampton Community College in Bethlehem Township, Pa. Zhao estimates she's taught about 20,000 students during her 30 years as a tai chi instructor.



Tai chi



Judith Gavigan of Nazareth and Anne Kiick of Bethlehem concentrate on their arm movements during Zhao's tai chi class.

Health practice has spiritual roots.

By JOHN A. ZUKOWSKI
The Express-Times

The reasons they come are many. Some people want a simple technique to help with health problems.

Some are attracted to an ancient Eastern approach to life.

Still others are looking for a way to combat a very modern problem.

"A lot of people come here to de-stress," one student admits during a break.

Each week a group of local residents perform a simple Chinese practice they say helps them clear their minds and rekindle depleted energy.

They move in simple but graceful motions which look like a cross between a slow-motion exercise and a simple dance.

"Let palm out, hold chin in," says instructor Ping Zhao during one

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Ping Zhao advises students on improving their tai chi movements. Zhao teaches in her Bethlehem office, and churches, hospitals and schools.

TAI CHI

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movement inside a large room at Northampton Community College in Bethlehem Township, Pa. Then she repeats "1-2-3-4," almost like a ballet instructor, as she leads the students.

It's part of a class on a 24-step sequence which Zhao says will take just six minutes to perform once students have learned it.

Over 30 years, Zhao estimates she's taught about 20,000 people.

Since she came to the Lehigh Valley in 1995, she's taught at many local hospitals, churches and colleges.

What she teaches is tai chi (pronounced tie-chee), a Chinese set of movements designed to improve health.

Sometimes Americans confuse it with yoga or aerobics. But tai chi is different. Unlike yoga, its roots aren't in Hinduism. And it's not a jumpy Western exercise routine such as aerobics.

Tai chi is a method of enhancing energy and reducing stress which has its roots in the Chinese religion Taoism (pronounced dow-iz-um).

Taoism is a spiritual practice traditionally believed to have been founded by Lao Tzu (551-470 B.C.) who believed life's ultimate principle was less in society but more in nature. Lao Tzu proposed living in harmony with nature in every possible way.

According to one legend, Lao Tzu — a contemporary of Confucius — became increasingly disenchanting with society. So much so he decided to flee his country.

Just before leaving, a gatekeeper asked him to write down his philosophy about how to live a fulfilled life. He wrote down 81 short verses that were ultimately published in the book "Tao Te Ching." The simple and poetic book is the most translated text in the world other than the Bible.

Centuries later, Taoism is increasingly thought of as a health practice and philosophy, not as a religious practice. And its offshoot of tai chi has been booming in America. That's because of the overall fascination with alternative medicine.

"American culture has become more health conscious and our body awareness has been height-

ened," says Lehigh University religion professor Norman Girardot. "In short, we've come to realize the mind is in a body and there is a relationship. And when you think about a human culture that has traditionally been concerned with these issues, it's been Taoism."

Taoism closely links good health with religion, Girardot says. That idea is beginning to resonate with more Westerners.

Increasingly, Americans believe living in a healthy way is a spiritual goal. Tai chi and yoga are seen as health programs and are even sometimes held in local churches. Zhao teaches tai chi in some local places of worship including the B'nai B'rith House in Allentown and First United Church of Christ in Hellertown.

"We have outreach programs for congregation members and the tai chi classes were a way to reach out to members to help keep them healthy," says Pat Zelko, tai chi coordinator at First United Church of Christ. "Tai chi forces you to look inside yourself and it also does amazing things for your muscles and balance."

THE ORIGIN

◆ Tai chi is a method of enhancing energy and reducing stress which has its roots in the Chinese religion Taoism.

Tai chi is based on the idea of qi (pronounced chee), the vital energy that is the essence of all life. A person is born with qi from their parents, and more

accumulates through breathing, eating food and through movement.

However, the qi that naturally flows through the body can become clogged. That can cause health problems, depression or stress.

The movements of tai chi gather qi and distribute it throughout the body. People who perform tai chi say one of the ways they actually feel qi flowing is through improved circulation.

"I play classical guitar and when I pick the guitar up my fingers are already warmed up because of the tai chi," says Chris Ballas of Nazareth. "It really does improve the circulation."

Aside from increasing circulation, tai chi is designed to rebalance the body. That balance is perhaps best depicted by the yin and yang symbol. The well-known Taoist symbol has black-and-white forces which symbolize the opposite yet balancing qualities of life known as yin and yang. Tai chi is designed to balance yin and yang forces within the body.

While some health officials may not know much about qi, they are tracking some of the health benefits. Some studies have shown that tai chi brings down high blood pressure, improves balance and even helps prevent some diseases.

In 1995, Zhao came to the United States as part of a scholar exchange program between Tianjian University of Commerce near Beijing in mainland China and Northampton Community College. She's a certified tai chi master and acupuncture therapist.

She's been teaching tai chi in a culture that's increasingly using the word Tao, a Chinese word that translates roughly as "the way" or "the path." It's become a cultural buzzword that has resulted in books being published about everything from the "Tao of Psychology" to the "Tao of Pooh." But in its original form, the word Tao is an important spiritual concept.

"Tai chi is actually a dance with the Tao," Girardot says.

Tai chi also is one of the subjects in an upcoming book by Lehigh University religion professor Michael Raposa. "Meditation in the Martial Arts" will be published at the end of November. He says the best translation of tai chi is actually "ridge pole."

"That's because in Taoism there's a cosmic ridge pole that the world it built around," Raposa says. "In Taoism everything that goes on inside the body mirrors what goes on in the cosmos. And in tai chi, it begins with the original Tao, then splits into the yin and the yang through leg movements and then returns to the original Tao at the end."

Some tai chi students say they see those connections in their own way.

"When you're feeling good physically, that can be spiritual," Ballas says. "Although it's spiritual, it doesn't mean that you have to believe in a certain type of thing. But when your body feels good your spirit feels good."

◆ Zhao offers tai chi and acupuncture at Authentic Eastern Health in Bethlehem. Information: 610-866-9087.

She also offers introductory tai chi classes at St. Luke's Hospital Health Center, Northampton Community College, First United Church of Christ in Hellertown and B'nai Brith House in Allentown. More advanced practice tai chi groups are held at Northampton Community College and the College Hill Moravian Church in Bethlehem.

◆ Reporter John A. Zukowski can be reached at 610-258-7171 or by e-mail at jzukowski@express-times.com.