



Being in the Moment Through Tai Chi

Self-defense art helps students increase range of motion

by Abby Malik, *Staff Writer*

Within Chinese culture, there exists the idea of yin and yang, the opposing forces in our bodies. It's said that practicing the self-defense art of Tai Chi balances these forces to promote health and wellbeing.

Tom Griswold, 67, is a martial arts instructor who has been teaching self-defense techniques at Griswold Self Defense in Lexington for the past 25 years. One of his specialties is Tai Chi, which combines balance and strength exercises with comprehensive self-defense movements.

Tai Chi students practice particular movements, such as outer circles and pushes, and then learn the purpose of those movements for self-defense in the form of blocks, strikes, throws and counter-joints.

In addition to providing self-defense techniques that can be used in real-life situations of danger, Tai Chi's gentle exercises focus on slow, repetitive movements, and those alone are very beneficial.

"I've found over the years that just an hour [of Tai Chi] a week helps, and the ultimate goal is to do 20 minutes a day," Griswold said.

Tai Chi techniques especially help individuals increase their range of motion.

"As we age, people don't use things, then they lose things," Griswold said. "Range of motion is a big deal in both self-defense and everyday life."

Mental preparation is an important part of Tai Chi. Griswold said finding focus during practice is the hardest part for many students. Instead of focusing on their current

move, they look two or three steps ahead. However, it's crucial to be in the moment when practicing Tai Chi. In an actual situation where self-defense using Tai Chi is necessary, good focus is essential for effectiveness.

"The only way to get that good focus is to practice," Griswold said.

Tai Chi is attractive to older adults because it isn't vigorous and individuals with little or no knowledge of the art of self-defense are welcome. A range of students can practice, including those who use walkers, have sight or weight issues and even those with more severe conditions such as cerebral

palsy or multiple sclerosis. Some Tai Chi instructors teach in senior citizen retirement communities where all the practitioners are in wheelchairs.

Much the same as with yoga, Tai Chi students are encouraged to practice at their own pace and not push the limits of their ability.

"People who are not careful when they train can get hurt, and it's counterproductive to be injured," Griswold said. "When you come away bruised or sore, something's not right."

Even though Tai Chi is a simple form of movement, Griswold said it isn't as easy as it looks, and it also isn't something to learn from a DVD or YouTube.

"It takes practice, it takes instruction and it takes an instructor," he said.

