

Tai chi is life-changing exercise



PHOTOS BY STEPHEN HAYFORD/THE NEWS-PRESS

■ Debbie Daniels of North Fort Myers participates in a tai chi class at MH Sports in Cape Coral recently. The exercise style is intended as an aid to meditation as well as a form of defense.

Calms mind, helps body, users say

BY TANYA SOMAROO

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Hilmar Fuchs believes tai chi can rebuild a person's life.

The ancient Chinese art, which incorporates proper breathing, posture and meditation, is all about gaining harmony, Fuchs said.

Slow, fluid movements allow students to focus their mind and energy.

"It's all about the energy flow in your body," Fuchs said.

Fuchs, a teacher of tai chi since 1965, began teaching the art in Cape Coral at Four Freedoms Park in the early 1990s. Classes are now at MH Sports & Health Care Center, 909 S.E. 47th Terrace.

The class begins with gentle stretching and breathing exercises and progresses to more complex choreography. Classes are limited to 12 students to provide individual attention to each student.

"Today's disharmony is a result of stagnation. We need proper breathing to get oxygen. If your posture is not straight, you cannot breathe right and

your circulation won't work at all," Fuchs said.

Pine Island resident Linda Blue, who has been taking tai chi with Fuchs for two years, can't say enough good things about it.

"It keeps me flexible and mentally sharp and alert," Blue said. "And I can do this until I'm 150."

Blue suffers from fibromyalgia, which causes pain in the muscles, ligaments and tendons.

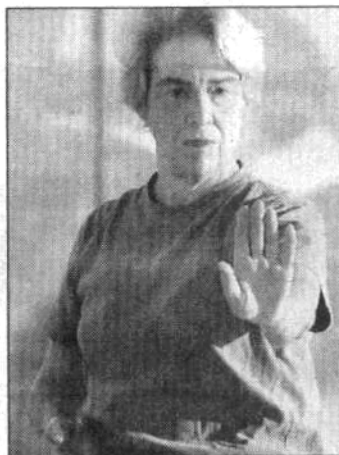
"Tai chi is the only thing I've found I can do consistently that helps," she said. "It's low-impact and it improves strength and flexibility."

Fran Clement, 61, of south Fort Myers has been taking Fuchs' tai chi class since he began offering them.

"It's always different and interesting," said Clement, who has been active all her life. "You do so many different exercise classes and it gets boring and repetitive."

She said the class is not just exercise, it is also a discussion on the health benefits of the particular exercise and nutrition.

About half the students come from outside Cape Coral. "We drive all the way here



■ Fran Clement of south Fort Myers pushes her hand through a tai chi posture at MH Sports in Cape Coral recently. Clement takes the class under instructor Hilmar Fuchs.

for Hilmar's class because he is so good," Blue said.

Fuchs offers a variety of classes for people with problems such as Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis and those who have had strokes. The exercises, which focus on expanding the range of motion and coordination of the left and right brain, can help relieve the symptoms of those conditions,

IF YOU GO:

- **What:** Tai chi classes
- **Where:** MH Sports & Health Care Center
- **When:** Various days and times
- **Cost:** \$69 to \$76 per person for six-week class
- **Details:** Call MH Sports & Health Care Center at 540-8441 or Four Freedoms Park at 574-0804

Fuchs said.

One group of the classes is designed for those who have osteoporosis or want to prevent it. It includes light weight training to improve bone density.

In addition to improved balance, flexibility and posture, Fuchs believes tai chi can reduce blood pressure and relieve the symptoms of emphysema.

He's seeking 25 senior citizens who would be willing to participate in a trial for four weeks to quantify the health benefits of tai chi. Participants would have their blood pressure and lung capacity tested at the beginning. After regular tai chi for four to six weeks, they would be tested again to see if there were any improvements.