



“I always feel happier after I’ve been to a t’ai chi class – it gives you more enthusiasm for life and more energy. It’s good for the physical health, too: I have some health problems, and my oxygen absorption has improved significantly since I started practising t’ai chi a couple of years ago.” **HEATHER BUDGE, 45**

of self-awareness, t’ai chi helps us to realise when we’re stressed or anxious and need to relax.”

Physiotherapist Edna Matthew agrees: “We use t’ai chi with a variety of patients, taking a holistic approach to their care. It helps physically, and can also contribute to their mental and emotional wellbeing,” she says.

Edna took up t’ai chi 13 years ago. “I realised that I was trying to do everything in fifth gear. T’ai chi made me look at how I was living my life, and had a very relaxing and calming effect on me.”

Bill Douglas, founder of worldwide health education event World Tai Chi, believes t’ai chi helps us move from our digital world back to a tangible one. Today “we experience less and less right-brain, tactile experience, and are more and

more drawn into the analytical or left-brain thinking,” he says.

“As we practise the gentle movements of t’ai chi, we are ‘soaked’ in the tactile pleasure we’ve almost forgotten in our digital lives. It helps us stay balanced in an increasingly digital and always accelerating world,” explains Bill.

T’ai chi advocate David Radford says, “Even with a small amount of practise, the mind and body relaxes, helping combat the stresses of modern society.”

“Unlike most forms of exercise and sport, t’ai chi doesn’t rely on strength, force and speed,

making it ideal for people of both sexes – young and old.”

BALANCE AND CONFIDENCE

For elderly people, t’ai chi has added benefits. “In later life, poor balance together with muscle loss greatly increases the risk of falling,” says Liz Lansley of North Somerset Primary Care Trust. “Some t’ai chi exercises help to maintain and even develop strength and balance, and classes for older people have proved very popular in North Somerset. Some of the best results have been with those who have had a fall and want to

reduce the risk of falling again.”

The Elderly Health Unit at Liverpool’s Broadgreen Hospital has seen similar results. Over the past four years, they have found an eight-week course for elderly fallers reduces the risk of further falls. “T’ai chi improves balance and confidence – and it’s fun,” says Sister Chris Drake. “We encourage patients to keep it up once they finish the course here, and Age Concern now offers follow-up sessions within their centres in the community.”

As t’ai chi teacher Tony Dove says: “The benefits are as varied as the people who practise it. For me, it’s all about enjoying the journey instead of racing through life.” ▶

“I realised I was trying to do everything in fifth gear. T’ai chi made me look at my life and had a calming effect on me.” **EDNA MATTHEW**

For a t’ai chi club in your area, see www.tachfinder.co.uk or phone 0845 890 0744.



HEATHER (LEFT) LOVES DOING TAI CHI OUTSIDE WHEN THE WEATHER PERMITS

Working miracles

The physical and mental benefits of t'ai chi have been known to the Chinese for some time. It's now one of the fastest-growing crazes among people of all ages

PHOTOGRAPHS CLAUDIA JANKE

It can put a spring in your step and a sparkle in your eye. People have been known to take it up in their 90s. And in some areas, it's even available on the NHS. But it's not a new wonder drug. It's the ancient Chinese art of t'ai chi, which has been practised for thousands of years.

As the benefits of t'ai chi become more widely recognised, its popularity in the UK is growing. There are now t'ai chi classes all over the country.

T'ai chi involves a series of gentle and controlled movements that increase flexibility, coordination and balance. The practice can improve circulation, reduce high blood pressure and help posture – which in turn can prevent back pain. It has also been described as a form of 'meditation in motion', because its smooth movements and

controlled breathing aid relaxation and help to keep the mind calm and focused.

What's more, t'ai chi has been shown to improve the lives of people with arthritis, Parkinson's disease and multiple sclerosis, as well as those recovering from strokes and heart attacks.

HOLISTIC APPROACH

How can such a gentle form of exercise work so many wonders? T'ai chi teacher Ronnie Robinson, who has been running classes in conjunction with the NHS Health Promotion Department in Glasgow, explains: 'T'ai chi provides a framework for the body to work at its optimum level. By improving our posture and the way we move, we allow the body to do its job much more easily. And by creating a deeper sense