

Popularity of Tai Chi Leaps in the U.S.

By Joanna Law (People's Daily Online)
16:26, February 27, 2012

Tai Chi has a long history of tradition in China for thousands of years. In the United States, the martial arts popularity has been increasing significantly. According to the 2007 National Health Interview Survey, around 2.5 million Americans practiced Tai Chi. Its surging recognition is partly due to the many research and studies that have been accumulated over the past years. Most of them proved the benefits of Tai Chi to patients with chronic diseases. Earlier in February, a new release shows that Tai Chi may help patients who are suffering from Parkinson's disease. People's Daily Online USA spoke to the Head of Research of this study.

"Nowadays, Tia Chi has been used more often in clinical settings, such as rehab settings and physical therapy settings. It is part of their rehabilitation techniques to treat patients with different disease problems. That's a big step forward for Tai Chi," said Professor Fuzhong Li at Oregon Research Institute in the United States.

The study, titled "Tai Chi and Postural Stability in Patients with Parkinson's disease", gives new hope to many people whose daily lives are hampered by balance impairments. People suffer from this disorder have high risk of falling and are unable to perform challenging tasks. The study shows that Tai Chi may help patients to regain physical balance and functionality performance, allowing them to accomplish certain basic tasks, such as grabbing a shopping bag from a table.

The study says that "Tai Chi training appears to reduce balance impairments in patients with mild-to-moderate Parkinson's disease, with additional benefits of improved functional capacity and reduced falls."

"What is good about Tai Chi is that it's highly self-initiative," Li said. "It is done in slow motion and movements, and it is done in a continuous and rhythmical pattern. More importantly, it's controllable. It is controlled by the mind."

The program of the research was different from the Tai Chi programs typically offered by the communities, Li said. Traditionally, a Tai Chi master would instruct students to center themselves by putting their body mass in the centre to avoid being uprooted by opponents. Li's approach was the opposite. It urged patients to move away from the centre. For example, a patient would be asked to lean forward to a point where he or she must take a step to prevent from falling. Li said their approach focuses more on stimulating people's muscle responses, particularly the muscles related to postural control.

"Tai Chi is to stable; the approach we take is to unstable, so that we can train people to readapt the movements, and be able to use that movements in a daily life, such as taking steps and reaching out for an object," Li said. "In other words, we transform traditional Tai Chi to physical therapy that could help people with balance impairment and people who have difficulties in walking."

Originally from Shanghai, China, Li has been familiar with Tai Chi's tradition and its benefits. But the idea that Tai Chi may possibly help Parkinson's disease patients first came up when a

couple of Li's friends were diagnosed with the disorder. Seeing his friends experienced frequent falls, jerky movements, and difficulties in walking, Li, a long-time Tai Chi practitioner, began to think Tai Chi could potentially open the door to Parkinson's disease.

"As a researcher, I also want to understand how this traditional exercise could help people, especially those who suffer from chronic diseases. I started to get interested in how Tai Chi can be used to solve severe problems that people face these days," he said.

The study took three and a half year to complete. Li said Parkinson's disease has five stages, with one to three as mild to moderate, while stage four is where people have hard time walking. Patients in stage five would be confined to bed. The 195 patients in the program were all diagnosed with the disorder within the first three stages. They were assigned to one of three exercise groups: Tai Chi, resistance training, or stretching and breathing. Patients were asked to go to one of these programs to exercise for six months. After that, they would undergo a three-month period of no exercise follow up. They would go home and were told to maintain their daily activity pattern as usual. Li's research team would assess the patients after three months.

"What we found is that compare with those in resistance training group and stretching group, patients in Tai Chi group did a much better job in maintaining their balance," he said.

Li emphasized that his study is not about Parkinson's disease prevention. Instead, it helps patients to improve some of their deteriorating functional performance. With around 1.5 million people diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in the United States, Li said the study has certainly made an impact. He hopes that his study has made one influential step to help Tai Chi to move forward.

"We will continue to make more impact with our research," Li said. "We all know that Tai Chi helps to maintain health and improve our mentality, but we need to take a step to look at how Tai Chi can be used not only in public health perspective but also in a perspective of how it can be addressed some common problems. That'd be a step of a big leap forward."

Tai Chi, after all, is a low technology exercise, he said. It does not require any equipment; it is low cost and convenience. "You can do it anywhere anytime without an equipment," he said.