



James Lusk (center) teaches a tai chi class in the March Wellness Center at OHSU. He has instructed all over the world and works especially for those with Parkinson's and multiple sclerosis. Below, he strikes a tai chi pose.

Photos by L.E. Baskow

The many health benefits of TAI CHI

By **MAGGI WHITE**
BOOMER & SENIOR NEWS

Oregon's boomer and senior generation is lucky.

Because of his help in Dr. Fuzhong Li's scientific studies, Portland's James Lusk has been recruited by the Oregon Health Authority to help implement tai chi classes throughout community centers in Oregon.

Li's studies are showing how effective tai chi is in helping improve the quality of life for those with Parkinson's disease and multiple sclerosis, as well as its benefits for many other health issues.

Additionally, you don't need to have any health problems to benefit from the movements associated with tai chi, and it's a great way for healthy people to stay healthy.

While the health benefits of tai chi are now an established fact in Western culture, the Chinese have known this for generations. In China, it is a common sight to see the senior population performing the martial arts movements in slow motion outdoors early in the morning.

Specifically, tai chi's benefits for Parkinson's were reported in the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine* in February 2012, stating it is highly effective in being able to preserve balance, improve walking and prevent falls. It outperformed strength training in several measures. The study was one of the largest controlled clinical

trials of exercise therapy for Parkinson's.

The study tested the modified form Lusk teaches and that was developed by Fuzhong Li, the senior research scientist at the Oregon Research Institute in Eugene. It uses fewer movements than traditional tai chi and focuses on shifting the body's center of gravity to challenge the systems that coordinate balance.

Lusk explains that those with Parkinson's are hesitant to initiate movement because of fear of falling. Doing the slow motion movements helps them overcome fear and allows them to do things they stopped doing, like moving the wheelbarrow while gardening or going from the car out to a restaurant. The study showed that after six months, tai chi helped the ability to lean in any direction without toppling and it improved walking strides.

There were other benefits as well. Equally important, it became a confidence builder.

Li and Lusk currently are studying the social aspects of tai chi classes for those 65 years of age and over. They both believe that social interaction contributes to well-being. The three-year study is in its second year.

Lusk, who is a personable tai chi instructor and master teacher, comes from a background in theater arts, where he was involved in singing, dancing and acting. In his early 40s, he decided to do something about the pain in his knees and his rounding back.

So he took up the martial arts discipline of tai chi, a decision that has led him into teaching 30 hours a week at OHSU's March Wellness Center working with Parkinson's and multiple sclerosis patients among other illnesses. He also teaches at several community centers and at a school.

Lusk says those with Parkinson's hesitate to initiate movement and tai

chi helps them overcome the fear and ease into more fluidity.

Parkinson's patients who try to control quivering and shaking limbs hold their bodies stiff and tai chi helps them to relax and stretch their muscles, which in turn helps them find a new basis for the center of balance.

The benefits of strength and flexibility work equally for those with MS. Being able to continue the activities of life that sufferers stop because of symptoms allows for a more normal life.

"Not feeling you are going to trip at any moment and not being afraid of falling is something you can do for yourself, and it gives me a feeling of purpose in my life," says Lusk.

He adds that the more beneficial results are for those who are in the early stages of the disease because they see results sooner.

Aside from increasing strength and fluidity in muscles, tai chi also is good for osteoporosis, lowering blood pressure and other health benefits. Done regularly, tai chi can reduce the risk of falls and injury and help with fibromyalgia. It could even prevent osteoporosis and make significant improvements in mean overall knee pain.

Lusk teaches the over-65 population at community centers, assisted living cen-

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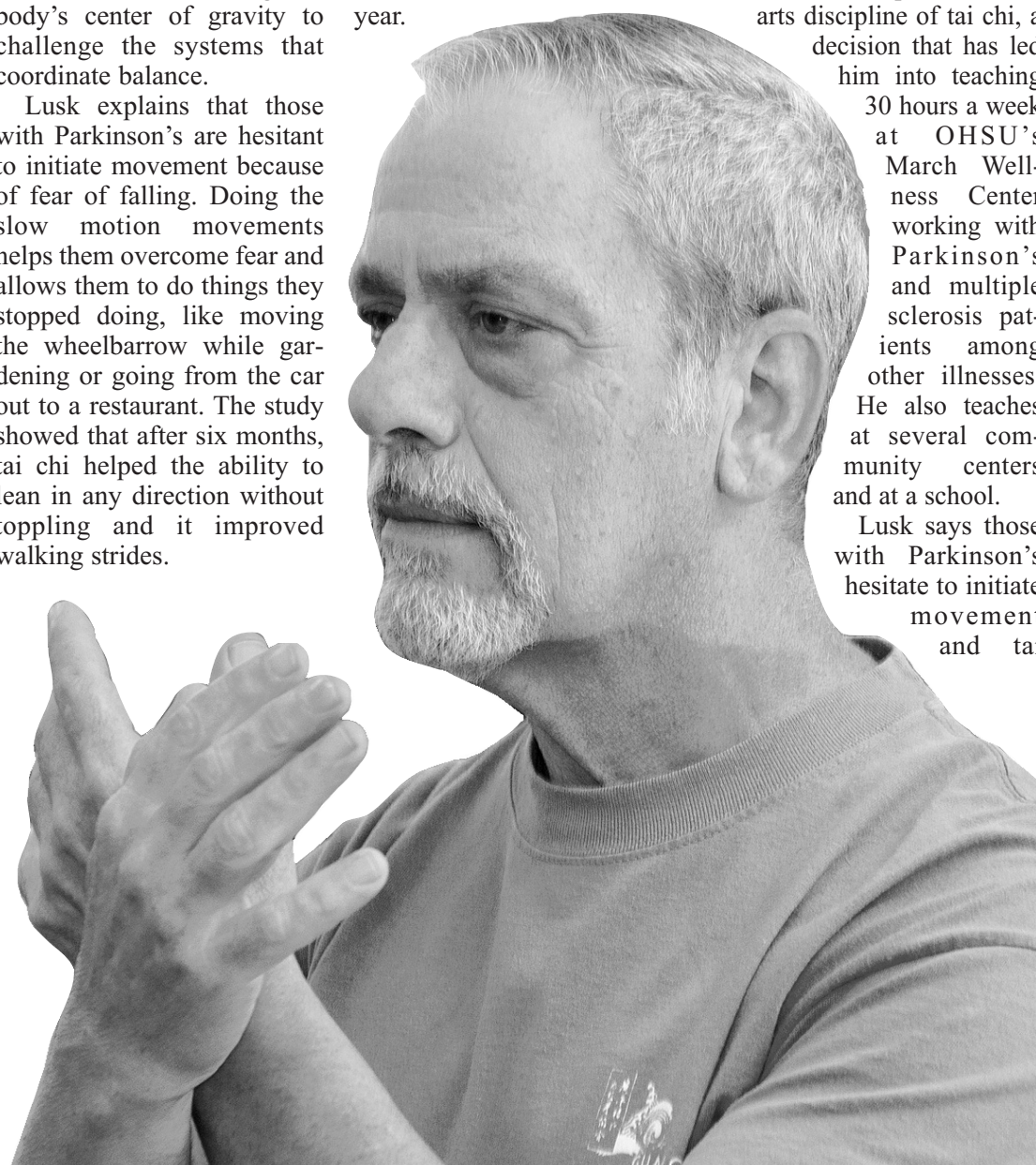




Photo by L.E. Baskow

Instructor James Lusk demonstrates a block and counter maneuver with one of his students while conducting the tai chi class at OHSU. The discipline is great for overall health and balance, but can be a self-defense tool as well.

TAI CHI

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ters such as Sellwood Landing, The Stafford in Lake Oswego, Laurelhurst in Southeast Portland, the Royalton in Milwaukie, at the OSHU March Wellness location, and he also teaches private students as well.

Tai chi can be done in a chair for those who need it.

He says HMOs and insurance companies are interested in tai chi but are waiting to see the results of the new Affordable Care Act to determine if it is financially feasible.

The cost at community centers is usually minimal and even YMCA nationwide has added tai chi classes. Many community centers also offer scholarships.

Lusk says that when he began learning tai chi in his 40s he found it difficult to learn, but he overcame his physical problems and feels "it made me a better teacher because I understand others who experience the same issues. Anyone can learn tai chi."

He says sometimes it can take four to six weeks to feel comfortable doing the movements, but once you get past that, "everyone who wants to learn can."

Of note

To learn more about tai chi try YouTube/Zuanchuan and www.thesourceacademy.com. OHSU March Wellness Center, 3303 SW Bond Ave. Unit MW, Portland. Call 503-418-6272 for more information.

"Anyone can learn tai chi ... It's a choreography of movement and subtleness in the body that keeps the movement interesting."

~ James Lusk, tai chi instructor

He says he would probably have had knee replacements if he hadn't started tai chi when he did.

"It's more fun than physical therapy," Lusk says. "Physical therapy is more

effective short range but tai chi results include social interaction, and that is a big part of building confidence and well-being. We are 'people' people."

He says what makes tai chi hard makes it interesting in the long run.

"It's a choreography of movement and subtleness in the body that keeps the movement interesting," he says.

The biggest factor as Lusk sees it personally is "mental health. Because I like interacting with people and it's a system I value and trust, I like to share it with people. General well-being affects the physical self."

Tai chi, he says, also helps with diabetes, the immune system and even with such maladies as shingles and blood pressure.

"When you watch people in China flowing together and looking so meditative and relaxed you know they must be feeling that inside," Lusk says. ■

"Hi, I'm Eliza! You won't find a more gentle cat. I'm on the quiet side, but I love getting attention. Everybody tells me that I am just the sweetest kitty in town.

"I am a sturdy gal (there's just more of me to love), but it doesn't stop me from enjoying playtime. I'm really good at chasing a string wand and juggling the sparkly mouse toy. But I have to admit, most of all, I just want to sit near you and be petted while I squint my big beautiful eyes at you with

the look of love. I would love to sit on the couch and catch up on your favorite shows with you. Or perch on your lap as you read a book."

Come visit Eliza at **Animal Aid**, Monday through Friday, 11 a.m. - 4 p.m., and Saturday from noon - 4 p.m. at 5335 S.W. 42nd Ave., Portland.

You can also go to www.AnimalAidPDX.org to check out other cats and dogs, or call 503-292-6628, option 3. ■

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