

Soft, slow Tai Chi proves perfect for rehabilitation



By SARAH GREEN

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The “golden rooster stands on one leg” as the early Saturday morning sun streams down on a group gathered at Queens Park.

As they “hold up the heavens” the Australian Academy of Tai Chi, attract the attention of passers-by as they perform their beautiful set of slow, controlled movements and postures.

Some are there to help their arthritis, others for balance and stability to prevent falls but they are all there for fitness and relaxation.

It is an image that is being seen more in Western cultures as a means of stress management and exercise.

Eighteen months ago Loreto Schultz attended her first class.

“It was recommended to help improve your balance and for people with osteoporosis.

“It is the only form of exercise that I know of that is recommended,” Loreto said.

“I really do enjoy it.

“It helps with balance, flexibility and memory ... as well as co-ordination.”

Loreto said she was initially apprehensive about attending classes.

“When you go to something new, you think you are doing it all wrong, but none of the people there are judgmental.

“They don’t mind going over things again,” she said.

“I was not used to doing anything physical besides walking; it was totally different thing for me.

“I am quite amazed at how much I am enjoying it.”

After 20 years instructor Leonie Gill can remember clearly her first class.

“At the beginning it is very daunting, I can remember that myself,” she said.

“There are many movements to learn. The Australian Academy takes it very slowly. There is a lot of revision, they break it down step-by-step and put it back



► Loreto Schultz practises Tai Chi in Queens Park.

PICTURE: BEV LACEY

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together again.”

When Leonie started in 1988, she was looking for a way to de-stress.

“My job is fairly busy and highly stressful,” she said. “I had no idea what Tai Chi was about, and thought ‘this might be okay’. I have done it ever since.”

Leonie learnt the ability to relax and be calmer on a day-to-day basis.

“It does take time and it is something that you would have to stick with,” she said.

“It leads to being calmer in all things that happen around you —

be it at work, home or wherever you might be.”

She said from a physical point of view, she needed to keep moving because of back injuries.

“It is a gentle exercise which is safe for me to do as an all over physical outlet and it makes you strong as well.”

The Australian Academy also practices Qijong (pronounced chee-gong) which is closely tied to Tai Chi and is generally used in China for medicinal and therapeutic purposes.

>> Continued next page

Academy devotees reap the benefits of Tai Chi

>> From previous page

"Practitioners will give you a prescription for Qijon exercise instead of a pill," Leonie said.

It works by implementing deep-controlled breathing and movements to help activate the lymphatic system which in turn cleanses the body.

Linda Fea started four and half years ago and not a night goes by when she does not practice her Tai Chi.

"Even if I get home at midnight," she said.

Linda tried Tai Chi after suffering a bad injury and did not have the confidence to go back to the gym.

"I found it very relaxing from the first time I went.

"At first I thought I don't know how this is going to keep me fit.

... it is quite amazing. I have better arms now than when I was hitting the gym and I think it is a wonderful way to relax and meditate ... I don't get colds. I don't get sick.

— Linda Fea

But it is quite amazing.

"I have better arms now than when I was hitting the gym and I think it is a wonderful way to relax and meditate."

On the health front Linda also sings the praise of the ancient Chinese form.

"Since I have done my Tai Chi, I don't get colds. I don't get sick."

Tai Chi is also a physical outlet for the growing aging population.

"It is very manageable and the pace is nice and steady," Leonie said. "People who have lost a lot of confidence can start and it will help with physical skills and balance."

Leonie said the Australian Academy also conducts a falls prevention program.



► The Australian Academy of Tai Chi member Loreto Schultz practises in Queens Park. PICTURES: BEV LACEY



► Sue O'Brien and Linda Fea (also above) perform with swords as part of their Tai Chi class at the Indoor Bowls Hall located in Annand Street, Toowoomba.

TAI CHI FACTS

Tai Chi is practiced increasingly in the West as a means of stress management and exercise.

Tai Chi is a series of slow, controlled movements or postures, usually practised outdoors to take advantage of the surrounding energy of nature.

Central to Tai Chi is the belief in the life essence, or Chi, that flows through invisible channels or meridians in the body.

When the flow of Chi is disrupted, illness is the result.

The regular practice of Tai Chi is said

to strengthen and improve Chi.

According to scientific studies, Tai Chi is an effective healing tool for a range of disorders, particularly chronic (for example, arthritis and heart disease) and stress related conditions.

A range of disorders Tai Chi can help to improve include:

- ✓ Anxiety
- ✓ Arthritis
- ✓ Balance and co-ordination
- ✓ Fatigue
- ✓ Joint stiffness
- ✓ Muscle tension
- ✓ Poor posture
- ✓ Stress

The Tai Chi movements can be loosely

described as shadow boxing or 'shadow kung fu' in slow motion.

Regular practice can increase flexibility and strength, and improve cardiovascular fitness.

The emphasis on correct posture means that Tai Chi can instil a greater awareness of the body and how it moves through space.

Tai Chi is also a form of meditation. By focusing exclusively on performing the body movements with grace and poise, the mind achieves a calm clarity.

The Australian Academy of Tai Chi in Toowoomba starts a new term on July 14 from 6pm at the Indoor Bowls Hall, Annand Street.