

Tai Chi for Carers – a whitepaper

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Tai Chi has received much coverage for the benefits reported by its practitioners and from a gradually accumulating body of research supporting these personal reports. For example the World Health Organisation Global Report on Falls Prevention in Older Age to be found at: http://www.who.int/ageing/publications/Falls_prevention7March.pdf

In my experience of some 40 years involvement with martial arts and about 20 with Tai Chi specifically, I can see a graduation of application from health through serious study to martial application. This whitepaper will focus on the very first level – what can be done to help those who have never done any Tai Chi but now wish to gain some of the benefits urgently, but who have only minimal personal resources. This may include suffers from Parkinsons, Alzheimers or similar debilitating conditions, as well as those undergoing rehabilitation or with specific falls related vulnerabilities or simply suffering general deterioration derived from increasing age.

In my experience with these groups it has been clear that there is a wide spectrum of abilities from those who are capable of standing and walking for the duration of a normal class of an hour or more, to those who cannot do so for a few minutes. It is to this latter group and their carers that this whitepaper is addressed, since they are likely to most benefit from small daily amounts of carer aided practice even if only 15 to 20 minutes per session – and consequently it is through training carers that Tai Chi practice may best be channelled.

Once the choreography of Tai Chi basic exercises are understood, what is then required is regular mindful physical practice i.e. with motivation, awareness and thought. The teacher model of “staying one step ahead of the students” consequently relates to the concept of carer and caree “sharing knowledge and learning together”. Since it is the mindful practice of appropriate exercises which appears to be beneficial.

Let us consider need and appropriateness:

- Exercise – what is needed is a small number of simple exercises based on Tai Chi principles of balance, posture, grounding and fluid movement about the body centre.
- A basic understanding of Tai Chi movement and practice as it applies at this level.
- Daily practice for a period and in such a way as suited to the individual - typically made up of one or more short sessions.
- Carry-over of Tai Chi principles learned from the exercises into everyday activities by continued mindfulness of physical movement.
- A learning feedback cycle between carer and caree, whereby the carer provides an external reference to assist the caree in their internal mindfulness. For example by offering observations about the way exercises are being performed and by offering encouragement and support.
- Availability of a carer training and mentoring program to support and enable them to develop their understanding and practice.

It is my contention that this would make an appropriate level of Tai Chi available to the widest range of people on an on-going basis, thus offering the correct level of practice to the widest range of people. As a conservative example one Tai Chi teacher, teaching 4 one day seminars a year each to just 10 people (themselves able to pass on to 10 carees) could effectively enable 400 people to receive appropriate level activity.

What are the alternatives?

- Taking carees to a Tai Chi class: Aside from transport difficulties and timing issues with care homes, such classes would usually involve standing, walking etc. for an hour or more which many individuals find impossible.
- Importing a Tai Chi teacher to care homes: Rarely practical for reasons of availability and cost.

Other issues involved concern:

- Somewhat like the joke about someone asking directions to be told – “Well if I was going there I wouldn’t start from here!” Essentially Tai Chi as a remedial therapy takes a great deal of individual motivation and resource to achieve progress at that stage. In other words – by the time it is needed then it is usually too late. Tai Chi practice is a skill best learned before it is needed.
- The time and motivation left to individuals to learn Tai Chi skill is sometimes short but the need is urgent, so that it is appropriate to set sights low to maximise chances of achievement.
- Often communication difficulties are experienced with individual students in these situations, whereas communication from Tai Chi teacher to carer may be quite clear – carers may then be best placed to transmit information to carees based on personal knowledge, relationship, opportunity and time available. So long as the messages are simple and appropriate, transmission via carers may be an entirely suitable means of communication given our limited goals.
- Extent of individual capability. At this level (and all levels in different ways) Tai Chi is about learning to look after oneself. This is often not easily understood in a class environment where students may interpret guidance as a command, so putting the responsibility for their learning onto the teacher. Carers have a different standing and are probably best able to judge caree capability, when to encourage, how to do so and when not to do so.
- Getting a class of vulnerable individuals together to give them enough practice weekly or daily is highly resource hungry. Whereas getting able-bodied carers to occasional seminars is much more possible and creates a pool of people operating in the caring community who can pass on Tai Chi at an appropriate level to many more people, e.g. care home staff, physiotherapists, relatives, hair dressers, chiropodists. Professional visiting carers might all find this an attractive skill supplement. In the jargon this represents the biggest “bang per buck” – or best use of resources.
- Given that much of the research so far undertaken relates to quite short-term trials – such as the 10-week and 15-week (weekly classes) falls prevention program carried out at The Letchworth Centre for Healthy Living in 2011 – we can see that a relatively small input can have very significant effects for the individuals concerned. We also see from experience that greater effects are achieved with daily practice. Consequently it is my belief that small daily amounts of mindful practice are the best way to achieve optimal outcomes most quickly.
- Methodology and practice – while initially it is sufficient to simply be motivated to take up Tai Chi exercises without understanding, it is important to develop the understanding that Tai Chi exercises are inter-related with a structure that enables individuals to develop according to a logical approach. This not only helps in maintaining enthusiasm as “magic” gives way to “science”, it is also vital to an individual deriving full benefit from the exercises themselves. Practice without thought and the understanding which comes from it presents only half the package, mindfulness and careful consideration of the process complete the learning/development cycle.

How can such a program be implemented? A regular seminar program would transmit this Tai Chi awareness to carers in a one or two day format. Repetition of these seminars would develop skill in Tai Chi exercises and in teaching them, while feeding into a follow up program including face-to-face, online and telephone mentoring.