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Marshalling praise for art of Tai Chi

Awareness day begins with T.O. parade, then celebrates opening of temple in Orangeville

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LESLIE SCRIVENER
 STAFF REPORTER

Aging Canadians seeking the big three – longevity, health and meaning in life – may have found a solution in a single practice, Taoist Tai Chi.

Founded in Toronto by Taoist monk Master Moy Lin-shin, who came here in 1970, the practices have quickly spread to 26 countries around the world.

Some 2,500 members gathered in a bucolic setting at the International Taoist Tai Chi Centre near Orangeville yesterday to celebrate the opening of the Fung Loy Kok Temple, and to mark the group's annual awareness day.

Taoist Tai Chi exercises, which are a soft form of martial arts, are demanding but not damaging to middle-aged bodies. The group claims success for those recovering from injuries or with chronic illnesses. And those interested in community service or philosophical engagement can study the texts of the Chinese sage Lao-Tzu, author of the mystical work, the Tao-te ching. (Some may be more familiar with the popular knockoffs: the Tao of Pooh or the Tao of Physics.)

The penetrating question for followers of the Tao: "What kind of person should I be?"

Among the visitors to the centre were newcomers to Tai Chi, Sheila Bristow, 71, and her friend Lynn Stevenson, 65. "We're rank beginners," said Bristow, a retired real estate broker from Barrie, who with Stevenson joined four months ago. "We were looking for physical well-being and mental well-being."

Stevenson, a retired manager with the Red Cross, said visits to the gym were no longer as enticing as they had been when she was younger. "I recognized I didn't want to go and damage myself on the machines," she said. But Tai Chi, often practised by Asian seniors in city parks, requires discipline and practice. "It's more physical than people think."

They were attending the temple opening ceremonies, which featured chanted prayers and a dragon dance, hoping to learn more about the spiritual aspects of the practice.

Ronald MacRae, 61, from Collingwood, said that younger people have "difficulty getting into it. It's a bit of a learning curve, 108 moves to learn in 16 weeks." David Draner, 53, a director of the organization, turned to



TARA WALTON/TORONTO STAR
 A ceremonial dragon is paraded around the \$20 million Fung Loy Kok Temple at the International Taoist Tai Chi Centre near Orangeville, Sept. 8, 2007, to celebrate the opening of the temple, and to mark the Taoist Tai Chi group's annual awareness day.

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Taoist Tai Chi following cancer treatment in his late 30s. A telecommunications consultant, Draper recently returned to Toronto from the Netherlands where Taoist Tai Chi groups blossomed from one, when he arrived, to groups in 40 cities.

The organization counts up to 40,000 members, including 15,000 in Canada.

The elegant \$20 million temple, which has been paid for in full by donations, looks like a traditional eastern place of worship. Inside, bowls of fruit sit before statues of deities, and the air is fragrant with burning sandalwood.

It's at the heart of a 42-hectare complex known as the Quiet Cultivation Centre, which includes residences for those taking Tai Chi courses and a 72-bed health centre for those with injuries or chronic illnesses.

The temple is unusual because it provides teachings in Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism.

The day's celebrations began early in the morning at Nathan Phillips Square, with a mass demonstration of Tai Chi movements and a parade of 2,000 marchers down Yonge St.

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