

Dance your way to de-stress

Contributed by Tom Sullivan
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Looking for a way to keep fit, de-stress and also learn self defence into the bargain? Aikido, a non-aggressive martial art from Japan, offers just that.

Watching people practicing aikido you could easily get the impression that you have accidentally stumbled across some kind of modern dance class.

Small groups of women, men and even children move back and forth with graceful, coordinated movements which often appear to have little to do with self-defense. Adapted from the more violent fighting art jujutsu, this gentle martial art combines circular movements, breathing and meditation to increase a person's internal energy or ki. But it is still very effective in fending off unwelcome approaches.

Rather than meet an attacker head on, aikido practitioners learn to move out of the way of their opponent and use their energy against them. Participants take turns performing dance-like movements, simulating attacks and defenses which provide an energetic workout. But for many, aikido - known as one of the more spiritual martial arts - is as much about the mind and spirit as the body.

"I was inspired by the philosophy of aikido which says that we must blend and harmonise with the universe and other people," says 24-year-old Sajan Nair. "Since I took it up last April I feel more at peace with myself. I am able to keep my cool."

Alan Nykamp, an American student who started practicing three months ago, claims to have the best of both worlds since he replaced body building and football with the Japanese martial art: "On a physical level I have lost about 10 kgs and have much more energy than before. I feel charged with a great deal of positive energy." Involving a lot of twisting from the waist, bending, rolling on gym mats and stretching, aikido is an excellent way to trim abs, increase flexibility and build up strength without bulking out muscles. This often makes it popular with women as brute force is not part of the training.

"You will gain inner peace, stay fit and get stronger through regular practice," explains Paritos Kar, the Bengali aikido master who studied in Tokyo for 15 years before returning to India to open a dojo (martial arts centre) in South Delhi. "It's not just about the body but also the mind and oneness with the spirit. Only by combining all of these can we really be healthy."

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