

In 2004, Pablo Toledo was diagnosed with a chronic and untreatable bowel disease. Since taking up tai chi just over a year ago, his health has improved enormously

BY BECKY MORAN

WITH just nine months to go until he finished his degree, Exeter University student Pablo Toledo withdrew from his course.

Two years before, the 26-year-old had been diagnosed with ulcerative colitis, a chronic and untreatable bowel disease.

Since the diagnosis, his weight had dropped to around eight stone and he was so weak he was house-bound most of the time.

"I was doing a degree in International Relations," explained Pablo.

"I was enjoying it — it was going really well, but I was very stressed and tried to do everything at once.

"In 2004, I started to get quite unwell. I was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis, when the intestine gets inflamed and you suffer from constant diarrhoea, blood loss and weight loss.

"The doctor gave me lots of quite heavy drugs, like steroids, to get it under control. That worked for a while but as time went on the drugs had no effect.

"I could have ended up having my bowel removed. I was really quite desperate."

Pablo struggled on as best he could, but at the end of his second year at university, his health had deteriorated so much he withdrew from his course.

"Not only was I ill, but stressed, desperate and tense," remembered Pablo.

"I walked around with a constant knot in my chest. I had just finished my second year at university, but I was spending most of my time in bed and couldn't get my essays in on time.

"I decided to try a bit of tai chi to relax and calm down."

Pablo had seen a poster advertising Rainbow Tai Chi classes run by Fiona Howard. In June 2006, he began to travel from his home in Exeter to Totnes once a week for an hour-long session.

"I would walk in a nervous wreck and walk out slightly less of a nervous wreck," he said.

"I felt that even just that one hour a week was doing me so much good I decided to do an intensive summer school in Ashburton.

"There was a point when I very nearly admitted myself to hospital because I was so thin, but the teacher, Peter Choy, persuaded me to stay.

"Within four days I was nearly back to normal, eating properly, putting on weight and the colour had come back. At the end of the



Pablo Toledo used tai chi to help overcome ulcerative colitis

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Pablo Toledo demonstrating one of his tai chi poses

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From bedridden to whole again, thanks to tai chi

three weeks, I was almost completely well.

"It was towards the end of the course that I thought 'this is amazing and no one knows about it'. I could have gone on and had my bowel removed and never known about it. That's when I decided I really wanted to share it and do the teacher training course."

Pablo is now halfway

through his training to become a teacher of Rainbow Tai Chi, and has already started taking weekly classes at the Mint Methodist Church in Exeter.

"I've definitely found my focus. I would like to finish my degree, but I've discovered something with so much depth that to be able to study that and share it is so much more rewarding," he

said. "I'm just a different person. I was physically incredibly ill, mentally very stressed and tense, really overwhelmed and off balance. The physical illness felt like just the tip of the iceberg.

"I've just become so much more peaceful and balanced as a person. I would never have cracked a joke or laughed a couple of years ago.

"It just feels so nice to have a laugh and be a bit lighter on myself. I feel much more whole as a person. I was in little bits before.

"Physically, I'm virtually healed. I'm so close to being really healed. It's amazing. I now feel I have a quality of life. A year ago I was completely bedridden and dashing to the bathroom every two minutes. It's pretty dramatic."

● For more information about Rainbow Tai Chi classes in Exeter, telephone 01626 836526 or email taichi@toledo.org.uk.

Tai Chi might have some advantages but more evidence is needed

RAINBOW Tai Chi is based on 15 fundamental exercises and principles developed by Peter Choy, which aim to promote a deeper understanding of your heart, mind, body and spirit.

Two studies which appeared in the British Journal of Sports Medicine both found that regular practice of tai chi increases heart and lung capacity, boosts the immune system, improves mental clarity, flexibility, balance and increases muscle strength.

Jonathan O'Keefe, GP Registrar at Mount Pleasant Health Centre in Exeter, said:

"There are many illnesses that conventional medicine finds difficult to treat or cure. Western medicine recognises that other approaches to treatment need to be explored. However, we need to be careful of anecdotal or single reports of cure. These can be misleading.

"The role of your doctor is to be both broadminded and sceptical at the same time. A weight of evidence is required before patients should adopt any new therapy — be it conventional or alternative.

"The association between stress and certain illnesses has

long been recognised, but little attended to. Patients with ulcerative colitis may well receive some benefit from a relaxation therapy such as tai chi. However, it is unlikely to represent a cure for patients with this illness. Further study is required.

"Tai chi is unlikely to be of any harm to patients who are well enough to engage in a minimum of physical activity, but patients would be unwise to abandon their conventional treatment. There is a large body of evidence for benefit in ulcerative colitis."