

Chunghuang AC Huang



Embrace Tiger,  
Return to Mountain

*The Essence of Tai Ji*

*Chungliang Al Huang*

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Return to Mountain*

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*Photographs by Si Chi Ko*

*Foreword by Alan Watts*



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## FOREWORD

My association with the author of this book is not simply that I have read his work and like it. We have known each other for quite a number of years. We have jointly conducted seminars at Esalen Institute and similar places, where I have spoken of Taoist philosophy and he has demonstrated its practice in terms of tai ji movement. We have spent much time together exploring this venerable philosophy, both intellectually and practically, and have come to a consensus of understanding and feeling about it such that I can say of the relationship between us that East and West have undoubtedly met—and, for me, this is no small matter.

To begin with, Huang teaches in a way that is unusual for an Asian master and, when I think back over my own schooling, for Western masters as well. He begins from the center and not from the fringe. He imparts an understanding of the basic principles of the art before going on to the meticulous details, and he refuses to break down the tai ji movements into a one-two-three drill so as to make the student into a robot. The traditional way (whether in tai ji, Zen, or yoga)

is to teach by rote, and to give the impression that long periods of boredom are the most essential part of training. In that way a student may go on for years and years without ever getting the feel of what he is doing. This is as true of theology, law, medicine, and mathematics as it is of tai ji, so that we have many “masters” of these disciplines who are plainly incompetent, no more than well-contrived imitations of the real thing. The strengths and weaknesses of human nature are the same in Asia as in the West: there are plenty of Buddhist, Hindu, and Taoist equivalents of pompous bishops, knife-happy surgeons, and pedantic scholars who cannot see the forest for the trees.

Tai ji exemplifies the most subtle principle of Taoism, known as *wu-wei*. Literally, this may be translated as “not doing,” but its proper meaning is to act without forcing—to move in accordance with the flow of nature’s course which is signified by the word *Tao*, and is best understood from watching the dynamics of water. *Wu-wei* is exemplified in the art of sailing, in which one uses intelligence, as distinct from rowing, in which force of muscle is dominant. In such arts of sailing, gliding, surfing, and skiing there must be no turns through sharp angles, for in such sharp turns human muscle would have to defy the environment of water, wind, or gravity instead of using it.

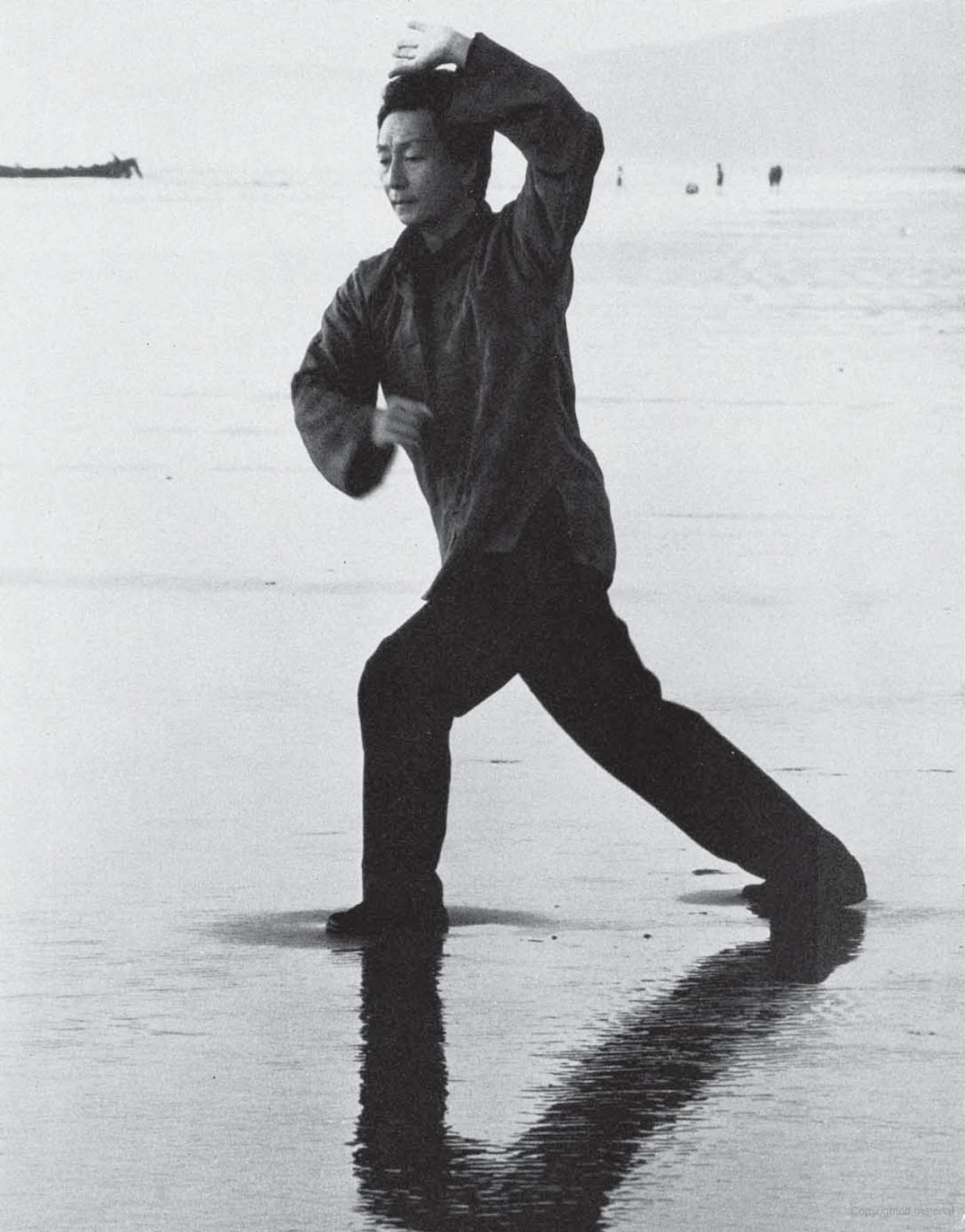
The spirit of *wu-wei* is to make turns with curves instead of crick-crack angles, and for this reason the whole biological world is curvaceous—water being its main component. As Lao-tzu said, although water is soft and weak it invariably overcomes the rigid and hard. To work with Huang is to learn to move with wind and water—not only in the tai ji exercises, but also in the course of everyday life. In going by “the watercourse way” he is as fresh as a mountain stream, with all its bubbles and babbles, and, way down below, as deep and powerful as the Yang-tze River.

Too many masters of the arts of life are disciplinary martinets, perhaps because too many of their students, while thinking that they ought to learn, do not really want to. All compulsory education is forced growth, and produces tasteless fruit. But with his skill in tai ji, as well as in dancing and flute-playing, Huang Chungliang woos and

beguiles his students instead of forcing them. This is the mark of a truly superior and gifted teacher who works upon others as the sun and rain upon plants.

Alan Watts  
Druid Heights,  
Rancho Sausalito, California, 1973







## INTRODUCTION

There are no beginnings and no endings. The universe is process and the process is in me. When I fight this process or ignore it, I am in trouble. When I move with it, something happens—like this book. My part in it is small. That doesn't make it unimportant. Arbitrarily, I choose a beginning for the process of this book.

At Esalen, two and a half years ago, a friend said, "Have you seen Al Huang? He's great!" I hadn't. "He is visiting here and he does tai ji on the deck an hour before lunch." I had sometimes enjoyed watching tai ji—as with Master Choy in Berkeley—and sometimes not—as with people whose joints seemed to go "click!" as they switched from one position to another like mechanical dolls. I had no interest in learning tai ji. The next morning I was out on the deck. Al told us to walk "as if you don't know what's there—maybe it's grass, maybe it's water." When I did this, tentativeness came into my body and released my mind from its clutching certainty. We held imaginary soap bubbles in our hands and walked with them. Hold them too tight, they break. Hold them too loose, they slip away.

I told Steve. Next day, he was there, too. All three of us were immediately close in the bubble-touching way, with exceptional

delight, that happens seldom. We spoke with Al about the possibility of doing a book about his work, but initially Al was reluctant, saying “What I do is the doing,” and doubting that anything in print could convey much of the spirit of his work. As an experiment, we taped a week-long workshop at Esalen in July, 1971, and later transcribed it. Al liked the transcript, so we used the material from this workshop as a framework for this book, editing, expanding sections, and adding material from transcripts of other workshops. The photographs were taken by Si Chi Ko, a photographer friend of Al’s, during a workshop at the Roscoe Center in New York in the spring of 1973. So the book has slowly grown over the past two and a half years in a very tai ji way. Even now, as the book is in galley proofs, it is still growing. Al writes:

“I have thought of several things that we have talked about but not included in the book. I have been noting them down, using them during workshops last month. But it will always be ongoing, changing, with new discoveries day-to-day.

“*Energy* is a confusing term. I try to make it clear that it is not nervous tension and not phony mental wishing. It is subtle and powerful, and circulates continuously in one’s mental/physical self. Acupuncture’s meridians show the paths of this ch’i-energy. In practicing tai ji ch’uan, as in pushing forward in the fire-element step, what one senses is the circular path of the ch’i from tant’ien out through the palms of the hands, outward and curving around to return to center. Beginners can only imagine it, and feel it fragmentedly. After long years of practice, it becomes very obvious. Energy is open, free-moving, unburdened, basically undefinable. It is life-force unforced, which then becomes forceful and powerful.

“*Flow* is so overused as a word. It sometimes suggests loosely letting go, sloppy, mushy, self-indulgent ‘freedom’ which is really not true spontaneity. Flow is like blood circulation, or breathing easily without self-consciousness. The ch’i flows in the body meridians when a body is perfectly healthy and natural. A person can’t force flow. Flow flows until we block it.

“After the first day of tai ji, one man went home bumping into things, feeling particularly clumsy. His first thought was negative: ‘How come tai ji is not making me graceful and flowing better?’ Then he realized that all his life he had been living and moving only partially and with constriction. Now, in spite of himself, he was moving bigger. His ch’i took over and he couldn’t keep up with it, so he found his usual space too cramped, bumped into things, and felt slightly disoriented.

“Last month I worked with a one-armed woman, a man with his right gluteus minimus muscle removed, and another man with a braced leg. The discovery for all of us was that the ch’i moves beyond the physical body. If we learn to relate to our tant’ien, and move beyond our physical limitations, without relying on muscles, we discover the simplest way to stay centered. By the end of the week, the woman was spinning and feeling balanced, and the men walked and danced without their crutches.”

In order to make a book we have to stop this changing growth process somewhere and set down what we have in unchanging print. Steve writes:

“Tai ji is a subtle and powerful awareness discipline, a tool to become more in touch with yourself. It is a way of allowing yourself to function naturally and smoothly, uncluttered with expectations, shoulds, hopes, fears, and other fantasies that interfere with our natural flow. Unlike so many paths to awareness, tai ji is beautiful to experience as you do it, and also beautiful to watch from the outside.

“Besides the utility and beauty of tai ji in itself, it has been valuable to me as an embodiment and expression of the psychological processes that I see in gestalt therapy work. If I continually reach out to others for love, I am tipping forward, off-center and unstable, leaning on whoever I contact, and likely to fall flat and hard if the other leaves. If I continually withdraw in fear, I am tipping backward, tense and rigid, and the slightest surprise will push me over. If I feel uncertain in myself and unstable in my base, then all my contacts with others will be wobbly and lack conviction. In contrast, if I can become

centered and balanced in my own experience, then I can carry this moving center with me. If I am balanced *now*, then I can move in any direction I wish with no danger of falling, and my contact with you is solid and real, coming to you from the root of my living.

“I could write much more. But this is Al’s book. He is a teacher who is living what he is doing, unpretentiously and with great clarity, beauty, and aliveness.”

Steve relates tai ji to human relations. Alan Watts writes of surfing and skiing. How about our daily lives? In Moab, Utah, there is a tai ji short order cook who has never heard of tai ji. It’s beautiful to watch him make hamburgers. In Albuquerque, I knew a tai ji mailman. My father was a North of England peasant who went to London and learned a trade. He taught me to do everything without force. “Easy does it,” weren’t just words to him. “If you have to force it, then something’s wrong. Find out what it is.” When I was sixteen, he taught me to drive a car, first briefly telling me the simple mechanics. After that he sat beside me while I drove, saying “*Listen* to the gears. Listen to the sound of tires on the road. Listen to the engine, and smell it, too. Don’t expect the road around the bend to be the way you think it is. Don’t expect the driver of the car ahead to make sense—maybe he’s a lunatic.” Be aware, alert and sensing, living and moving in harmony, with no grinding and no crash.

A young Indian working for the Forest Service, cutting trails in mountainous country, said he didn’t understand the way the other young men worked. “They attack the brush with such force—and then they sit down and puff and pant. Then they fight it again—and sit down and rest again.” He demonstrated their actions with his body, and then his own way. His own way was easy tai ji flowing movements, swinging and returning without a break—strength without force. “I don’t have to rest,” he said, “I can do that all day.”

When we were doing tai ji with Al’s class in Provo, Utah, a man watched us for ten or fifteen minutes. He had never seen tai ji before and asked what it was. “That would be good for athletes,” he said, “and for my mother’s arthritis.”

This sounds like I’m calling tai ji a panacea—and it is. Tai ji is

Zen, is dhyana, is meditation, is yoga, is gestalt—and you have to put them all in a circle and start anywhere to know that. *Panacea* means simply “to cure all.” No promise of *instant* cure, or that someone can do it to or for you, or that some pill will do it. Unlearning what has been going on for centuries is not easy, and ego/intellect/I rebels at giving up control and taking second place—the function it was designed for. It’s a radical change, and ego screams that it’s all nonsense, and babbles of the terrible things that will happen to me if I do it. Al Huang’s way of teaching lets me experience something and know that I feel good with it. Ego says “Yes, but . . .” I learn a little, and forget a lot. In our society, sometimes I feel as if I’m trying to learn to ride a bicycle and people and events and requirements keep throwing me. This happens to Al Huang too. In a letter written in April, he said:

“Days like that: When I must be on time to teach the tai ji class, and Lark is fussy, making unreasonable demands to slow down the process, and as a result I run right past a stop sign and get a ticket.

“Moments like this one: When I just finished suggesting to a student not to rush life, to enjoy the process and look at the trees and clouds between running from place to place, I turned around and tripped down the staircase. Irony or paradox? Innocence or fake belief? Charlatan in all of us? Part of it, often all of it, is true. And because of it, we can laugh and ring clear and release ourselves to be more free.

“I suppose the whole idea of being called a tai ji Master, and a prospective author on the subject of life’s dimensions, puzzles me. I am conscious of the burden. And subconsciously delaying the process of buckling down to complete the manuscript.”

Last week, in this isolated desert valley where I live, it had been 100 degrees or more for a couple of weeks. Then it rained. I steamed. I wished for the shower that I didn’t want to take because we’re having water supply problems. I would be stoic. Like concrete. Then I woke up, took off my clothes, and went for a walk in the rain.

Barry Stevens  
John Stevens  
Shura, Utah, 1973





## CHAPTER I

It happens: We sit here in a circle in silence. Most of the time we find it very difficult to sit and not break the silence . . . and just allow something to happen.

I'm not here to teach you anything. I'm here to share with you how I learn about tai ji. So hopefully by the end of the week you will begin to learn about tai ji through *you*. Tai ji is just a Chinese word for something that appears in many forms of discipline. Yoga, in essence, is tai ji. Zen is tai ji. Tai ji is what is. No more, no less.

Some of you have learned the *form* of tai ji chuan. We will practice some of the forms and we will work on them, but my main purpose is to help you to recreate what happened many hundreds of years ago when the Taoists first created tai ji chuan. What happened then? What was that creative process that made it such a spontaneous form that even now we look at this phrase of movement and say, "Ah, that's beautiful, that's so simple, and I can identify with it." And then when you begin to learn, it's so hard, because you're fighting between the structure and what seems to be so unattainable.



There is a lot of confusion about what tai ji is, and what tai ji *chuan* is. Mostly everybody is concerned with what form is being done. “Oh, I study from so and so, and he studies from Master Tsung—or Master Choy—and this is the Ma style and this is the Wu style and this is the Yan style. What do you practice?” I say “I practice the Huang style.” My style comes out of all these other styles, and I have to develop to the point that it becomes me.

I discovered tai ji first as a child, completely unprejudiced. Out in the field every morning, the tai ji master would practice, and we would follow and have fun among ourselves. We had years and years of working this way with the master, and before we knew it we were doing it, and it had become ours. I lost it when I came to this country, and then I had to work backward and recapture it after I became a concert dancer. I found that the only way I can really keep my movement and my dancing fresh is to work within myself in the tai ji way—which is a constant re-creation, a regeneration of energy and a re-birth each time I do it. This is why tai ji is so vital for movement and dance, where you really work with your body.

In this culture, we rely so much on the mind that we become separated from other aspects of our living. An exercise, a discipline like tai ji immediately points out where you lack, where you go astray. Why do you find something that is so easy to understand intellectually, so difficult to do? This division between thinking and doing is so clear; it takes so long to really find that yin/yang balance.

The yin/yang symbol is the interlocking, melting together of the flow of movement within a circle. The similar—and at the same time obviously contrasting—energies are moving *together*. Within the black area there is a white dot and within the white fish shape, there is a black dot. The whole idea of a circle divided in this way is to show that within a unity there is duality and polarity and contrast. The only way to find real balance without losing the centering feeling of the circle is to think of the contrasting energies moving together and in union, in harmony, interlocking. In a sense this is really like a white fish and a black fish mating. It’s a union and flowing interaction. It’s a

kind of consummation between two forces, male and female, mind and body, good and bad. It's a very important way of living. People identify with this kind of concept in the Orient much more than in our Western culture, where the tendency is to identify with one force and to reject the contrasting element. If you identify with only one side of the duality, then you become unbalanced. Tai ji can help you to realize how you are unbalanced and help you to become centered again as you re-establish a flow between the two sides. So don't get stuck in a corner, because a circle has no corners. If you think in this way, you open up more, and you don't feel like you have to catch up with anything.

Someone said that the difference between an Oriental man and a Western man is this: The Oriental man is very empty and light up here in the head and very heavy down here in the belly and he feels very secure. The Western man is light in the belly and very heavy up here in the head, so he topples over. In our Western society so much is in the head, so much is in talking and thinking about things, that we can analyze everything to pieces and it's still distant from us, still not really understood. We have so many mechanical gadgets to do our work for us that our bodies are underemphasized. In order to regain balance we have to emphasize the body and we must work with the mind-body together.

Some people realize that their bodies need more work, so they run, jog, ride bicycles, swim, and then say "O.K. I have done my share of exercise." But this is still a separation of "body time" and "mind time," like the separation of work and play that most people experience. You work very hard so that you can take a vacation and come to a beautiful place to enjoy yourself. This brings a separation in your life. Working shouldn't be such a chore. Playing shouldn't be such a straining for fun, fun, fun. Work and play can combine. Nonverbal activities are a very important way to regain balance and find unity in your life. When you stop talking you have a chance to open up and become receptive to what is happening in your body and to what is going on around you.

Tai ji is one of the many ways to help you to discipline your

body and find a way to release that tension within you. Tai ji can be a way of letting your body really teach you and be with you and help you to get through the conflicts you encounter every day.

As a movement teacher, as a tai ji teacher, I find the most difficult thing is an *unlearning* process that we have to go through. So the first couple of days we will be unlearning.

There is a lovely story about a professor who comes to a Zen master. He says, "Hello, I'm doctor so and so, I'm such and such. I would like to learn from you about Zen Buddhism." The master says, "Would you like to sit down?" "Yes." "Would you like some tea?" "Yes." He pours some tea, and he continues pouring even after the cup is full, and finally the professor says, "The tea is spilling all over, it is spilling all over!" And the master says, "Exactly. You come with a full cup. Your cup is already spilling over, so how can I give you anything? You are already overflowing with all that knowledge. Unless you come with emptiness and openness, I can give you nothing." We need that kind of innocence, that kind of ignorance, in learning and dealing with things every day.

So we will have to practice emptying our cups to allow us to receive. We were doing some of this as we were sitting here in silence. In a way we were emptying our thoughts and anticipations. Each of you come with a different kind of expectation. Some of you know my work; some of you think it's going to be good for you. For others, this is just a try. You all have different kinds of anticipations of what you want, and it will take a few sessions for us to really settle down and just be with ourselves *now* in working.

Sitting in a circle is such a simple way of saying that I'm you and you and you and you, and we are the circle, we are here. Right there is the center. While I'm talking, I'm using verbal thoughts to communicate with you but what I'm really doing is sensing you. This also gives me time to empty my own cup of what I want to say—my anxiety to get across to you what tai ji is. It's so easy for me to say and so hard for me to get *to* you. And sooner or later we reach a dead end when we talk.

So what we have to do is go back and forth between talk and experience. We will talk for a while, and then experiment with movement. I like to start my own meditation practice as early as possible, and tai ji works very well in the early morning. But because of the hours we keep here at Big Sur, and the reluctance to go to bed, if we begin to dance and enjoy the baths and the moon, we usually don't get to bed as early as we should. Because of the mountain, the sun comes up very late, about seven o'clock now. I will begin practicing by the pool around seven-thirty, and I would like all of you to come and join me. Tonight, before we finish, I will provide you with some structure and motifs for you to do. But in the morning, I do not speak: I do not talk to you; you do not talk to me. And you should not watch me and say, "Let's do what he does." You each do your own tai ji.

Those of you who have studied tai ji from another master, don't say, "Let's compare this: this is not quite the same," or "He is doing that first, I'm doing that last." Tai ji is an individual discipline; it's not the kind of unison movement you find in a set choreography.

One of the best images for tai ji is nature, and the movement of nature. The different branches on the same tree do not move the same but they are moving in unity. When you look at nature, everything has its own motion: the tree and the rock and the water running—they somehow tie together without making a point to fit. When you watch the waves coming over the rocks, you see that the wave has wave-nature, rock has rock-nature. They do not violate each other's nature. That's a Tao concept, a Zen concept that exactly fits into tai ji practice.

In the evenings, we will have an open movement session with live music. We will do some folk dancing. I have also brought some tapes which are a result of my tai ji sessions with some musicians that I've worked with. So we can work through different ways to get to the same process.

Now there is change. Our circle just expanded because of the new people joining in. Understanding tai ji makes you feel like an amoeba. That's something we have to do: We have to return to being

an amoeba, so we can recapture our resilience. There are always these two elements: You wish you could dance like somebody else, and you wish you could still move like a child. You look at children or you look at somebody who happens to be a very fine mover or dancer and you say, "That's very graceful, that's very nice." And I would say you can do the same thing. You may not be able to kick your leg as high as someone else, but that's not the point. That's only a particular extension, a particular achievement.

The basic process in movement is a sense of *awareness*, and a sense of *being*. When you feel like you're together, you're dancing. When you are not dancing is when you feel like you are "all over the place." Your mind is thinking here, your muscle tensed up there; you do not know where you are any more, and suddenly you trip over something and hurt yourself. Being together means centering, means tai ji.

This is all intellectual so far—we all understand this. Those of you who come here, you already have some positive sense of what you want—to be *more* with yourself. You want to *extend* more, you want to *come back* more, you want to just *feel* more—with your whole total being: body and mind moving together. And I would say do more with the body. Most of us are heavy enough up here in the head, so let's get down here, in the body.

All right. Let's stand up where we are now. Tonight I just want to point out some simple, obvious things that we can do. When you are standing up, you are nothing but muscles holding your bones. What is important is *how* you are holding up this structure. My daughter is one year old; she's just walking. It's a marvel to watch her having so much fun squatting down and standing up—a real discovery with her body. We usually take most of this for granted, and at other times we try too hard to hold ourselves up.

One way of loosening up is by shaking yourself all over. In this kind of shaking you sometimes do too much, and become more tense. I want you to extend this shaking movement and at the same time just let everything go. If you still feel tension, try to simply become more

aware of your tension, and go with it. Sometimes this takes a little longer, but it really is a better way. If you shake yourself, you are still *doing* something with your body instead of *allowing* it to happen. When you shake yourself you sometimes become more tense. Letting go by just becoming aware of tension is an example of wu-wei—doing by not doing, non-assertion, non-interference. So in the beginning it is useful to simply accept what your body is doing. When you really accept your tension, letting go will happen without effort and you will become less tense. All your life you've been told, "Stand up on your own two feet. Take care of yourself. Be responsible. Hold the world on your shoulders." You try so hard to stand up straight, to be strong and not to crumble, not to give in, not to be a failure, not to do the wrong thing.

Right now, allow your body to let go while remaining in a standing position. Become really aware of what gravity is doing to you, and go along with that. It's not a matter of being crushed down and crumbling. Just let gravity pull you down and help you let go. Give in to this force. You don't have to be either weak or strong.

If I go around and push down on your shoulders, you should bounce with me like a ping-pong ball. The basic thing is to realize how tight we are, just standing up. No matter how free we *think* we want to be, it is still often just in our minds. The mental freedom and the physical freedom are soon separated. This is why we need the body awareness and discipline. The whole idea of this kind of technique is first an acceptance, and then a willingness to give in, and then a discipline to help you find a constant understanding of this living balance in your body.

Usually in my beginning sessions when I push down on your shoulders, almost everybody makes me work very hard, until you realize how unnecessary it is to fight back. Your body has the curves and bends to give in, to be resilient in your ankles, knees, hips, and shoulders. When we realize that all this holding up is unnecessary, and all this tightening and rigidity is not needed, then we can bounce again.

The second time I come around to push you down, it is usually a little easier for you to give. Now you can sense how much energy I

push with; you can go with me, and somehow we are rhythmically in tune. It's an easy feeling. Now your body doesn't need to hold up so straight. The body is made with these marvelous joints which bounce and recoil. One of the best images of Zen and Tao is to be like bamboo, or a bow. You can feel the weight here on your shoulders. But instead of resisting, you bend like a bow and then spring back when the weight releases. Instead of resisting the energy, you store it up and use it as you recoil.

Now stretch your arms up over your head. Get hold of your hands and stretch to your full length. Keep stretching and think of this energy going up. Then let your hands come apart; let your arms just flow out and down to your sides. You can sense how this upward energy moves out and down in a circle. The length of your arm becomes the curve of a ball and your energy shoots out and down. Now experience the relief of that feeling in your neck and chest when you let your arm go, and enjoy the descent.

When energy stores inside of us without natural release, we build up tension. Since energy is a continuous source of being alive every day, we must learn to be with it, to release it when necessary and to regenerate it. This time when your hands release, try to let the body also settle down; let your knees go a little bit, and sink.

Some of you begin to forget to breathe. When you release your arms, release that air too and let it come out. You can begin to discover the natural coordination of your inhalation/exhalation that corresponds with this simple gesture of stretching, and then letting go and descending.

As you do it several times, you also notice that the hands have to break apart when they do. You do not plan to break. When the hands have to break, they break. Those of you who have read Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery* know the imagery when he writes that "the arrow lets go." When it's ready to shoot, it will go and the energy will aim for the bulls-eye. The bulls-eye is not a fixed place. It only appears as the energy gathers, ready to be sent forth. What you can feel is the release in your chest, and the sensation of the air flowing out. Unless the whole

body allows this giving in to it, you can't be sure of the release of the chest and the whole feeling of letting the air just flow out. Inhale as you reach up and clasp your hands together and stretch, and then let the air flow out as your hands break apart and flow down. Let your whole body sink a little as your arms come down.

Now let the downward movement flow continuously into an upward movement, so that you don't lose the energy. As your hands come down, let them come in and then scoop up in front of you as you reach up again.

Just try this for fun. I'm going to give you three counts up, three counts down. When you get into a regular rhythm like this, it makes you feel somewhat mechanical. Because of our individual differences in height, because of our own differing sense of expansion and contraction, we are varying in spite of our efforts to stay with the count. Those of you who are familiar with the Eastern or Hindu music know that the whole rhythmical structure is quite different from most conventional Western music which depends on the bar-line structure. Many contemporary musicians try to get out of this rigid confinement by doing away with bar-lines and by mixing meters. This music gets back to a more natural flow that corresponds with the emotional and bodily changes.

This is why in tai ji practice we do not count: We work on a continuous flow. This is another aspect of tai ji, which ties in exactly with the *I Ching*, the *Book of Changes*. Change is yin and constant is yang, or vice versa. So the constant thing is that we all can fit into the changing rise and fall. The change is constant; the constant is change. In movement, we learn to really understand this intellectual concept. Part of our everyday conflict is how to cope with the changes and how to be happy with the constant. We are usually bored with the constant, and we get frantic with the change. We have all kinds of gimmicks: "Meditate!" "Pull yourself together!" "Relax!" "Do therapy!" But these all boil down to one thing: Accept *both* the constant and the change. Learn how to be resilient and responsive to your surroundings, to time, and to yourself.



In tai ji practice, you move very slowly. By moving very slowly you have time to be aware of all the subtle details of your movement and your relationship to your surroundings. It's so slow that you really have no way of saying this is slower than that or faster than that. You reach a level of speed that is like slow motion, in which everything is just happening. You slow it to the point that you are fully involved in the process of each moment as it happens. You transcend the form and any concern you might have to achieve some particular motif.

It's like when we were sitting here very silently and you were waiting for me to start. You were wondering, "When is he going to begin?" Everybody is getting tense. You keep wondering and waiting, and after a while you realize there's no use wondering. "He'll start whenever he wants to start, and I'll just relax." Some of you begin to relax. Suddenly time stands still for a second. There's a moment when you are willing to say, "Let it happen, whatever happens, whenever it's happening." "It's not my worry, I don't have to push it or rush it." You allow that moment to happen.

The same is true for me. If I worry, if I am self-conscious, I must first allow that tension to go, and then I will begin. I may have a whole bunch of things stuffed in my mind that "I have to get across to you tonight," but if I don't just drop it and let it all go, it will never come out right. I will just be reciting what I have written down. Or I will just tell you all about tai ji history and concepts. Most of you have read about this already, and intellectually you understand—there's no need for me to repeat it. What happens tonight must grow out of what we feel now.

I came here a little earlier on Friday, to sit in on the last two sessions of an aikido workshop. They were working on sensing and the feeling of balance. Aikido is an outgrowth of tai ji, created by Morihei Uyeshiba less than a hundred years ago in Japan. Aiki means the unity, the gathering of the ki. The Japanese ki is the same as the ch'i, the breath essence of tai ji. The do in the word aikido is the same as Tao, the path or the way. Aikido means the way of unifying your ch'i.

There are many other outgrowths of tai ji. Judo means “the gentle way.” Karate means “the empty hand.” Kendo and kenpo are Japanese sword practices which also developed out of the same basic principles. All of these are extensions and developments of the tai ji foundation, and all are based on the sense of meditation and movement, flow and awareness.

All these Japanese forms of movement and centering are very highly developed forms of tai ji. The Japanese forms developed out of Zen Buddhism, which came from the Chinese Ch’an Buddhism. Ch’an Buddhism developed out of the union between Hindu mysticism and Chinese Taoism. Two major forms are exclusively Chinese. One is the tai ji chuan; the other is kung-fu, which literally means “the skillful man—the man’s skill, his energy skill.” It’s commonly used to mean various series of exercises that show how strong you can be, that you know how to fight. Kung-fu is a very masculine, aggressive, yang way of extending your tai ji energy. Judo and aikido use the contrasting receptive yin approach, self-protection rather than aggression. Tai ji is both yin and yang; it is the center pole, right in the middle. With tai ji as a basis you can move easily into any of these different extensions.

Important to all of these is the sense of balance, and the feeling of knowing where you are. Most of you have some sense of where your center is, physically. When you sit, you try to find a comfortable position. In a way you are trying to find your center so you can be more settled and comfortable. In Zen Buddhist zazen when you sit in lotus position, you find your center. In hatha yoga postures you also put your body into a closer position so you can really sense where you are. All these ways are basically static. Tai ji is slightly different in this one point: It helps you to find a *moving* center. It’s a movement meditation; you move your center with you. Although you are constantly in motion, you retain that quietness and stillness.

Experiment with this as you are sitting here now. I want you to physically find the place where you think your center is. Let your arms rest in your lap so you feel compact and balanced, sitting with a

straight back. When you want to be quiet, just let your movement subside and diminish, and you will slowly come to a real stillness and centeredness. If you think you have to stop all movement, then you will become tense and rigid. You may look quiet from the outside, but inside there will be all kinds of tension and confusion. When you allow your movement to come to rest, you don't stop moving. Allow yourself to be like a pond that has been stirred up and slowly returns to a calm, smooth surface. Movement diminishes, but it's still there, like the stillness of this quiet pond, where there are still little ripples from time to time.

Now imagine that this is a zazen class and the master is watching you. You want to do a good job so you are really holding yourself very still. Now let's say you feel some discomfort in your back or somewhere else, and you feel a desire to move. The more you try to hold that position and deny that discomfort, the worse the discomfort becomes. Now let your body go a little and let movement happen. Instead of fighting it, let it happen and follow it. Let your spine sway a little from side to side. If you follow the movement, it will eventually curve around some way and return to your center.

If you think of a gentle uplift from the top of your head, then your spine will be quite straight without rigid holding. Let your spine be like a willow that moves with the wind, and then returns to straightness. Let all these curving movements get smaller and smaller. Eventually you will get to the point where you seem to be sitting still, but actually this movement is still circulating in your body. This is very comfortable and easy for your back, because you have allowed movement to come to rest instead of fighting it and becoming tense. You maintain the same kind of moving energy within your stillness.

As you're doing this, be aware of your breathing pattern. Try to breathe very fully, without forcing it. Sometimes we say "observing the breathing." This does not mean that you are outside of it; it means that you just follow it, and go with it. Don't force the stomach to come out, for instance, just because you think it should be healthier.

In tai ji, we call the breath energy the ch'i. It is the energy that

we use as we move. The lower abdomen just below the navel is called the *tan'ien*, and is considered to be both a reservoir for the *ch'i*, and the center from which our movement originates. *Tan* means the distilled vital essence, and also the rich, red color of blood. *T'ien* means field or place. So the *tan'ien* is the field of energy, the intrinsic energy, the reservoir of your vital force. The *tan'ien* corresponds to the Japanese *hara* or the Sufi *kath*. Focusing attention on the breathing and the *tan'ien* is a useful way of becoming centered.

Tai ji emphasizes a continuous circular breathing pattern. Circular means that you do not stop breathing out to breathe in, or the other way around. The letting go of your breath is the beginning of the coming in. This happens automatically when you just take a few minutes to do breathing. I emphasize this because it is very important that you realize the circular flow of your breathing. As you think of circular breathing, can you visualize the pattern of the relationship to your body? Is it a circle that goes running up the back and down the front of your torso? Do you visualize the air as an abstract pattern coming out of your nostrils, going down to the back part of your spine, coming back? How do you see it? Is it counterclockwise or clockwise? Does it turn horizontally or vertically, or does it go in a diagonal pattern? How is it? The circle expands, contracts, and changes. Make this circle a little more flexible. In tai ji movement, that circle goes all around. All the extensions of your body originate in your center, and then return to center again. You have all these individual loops and circles that keep coming back into this sphere of energy which is somewhere in your center. During the meditation process you allow that to happen. When all the imagery in your thoughts becomes your bodily feeling, then the first movement begins.

Now concentrate a little more into the base of your spine where you sit. If you're not sitting straight, try to sit straighter so you can really feel it. Breathe a little deeper and see if you can feel each disc of your back moving in relation to that expansion and contraction. Feel the back part of your spine with your breathing. Breathe a little bigger without tensing or forcing. See if you can identify that circular curve.

If we had straight-backed chairs, it would be very good for you to feel your body leaning and pushing against it. The other day I had a belt on that was touching the back part of the wooden chair, and it kept saying “dat dat dat dat, dat . . . dat . . . dat . . . dat, dat, datdatdat”—as my back was going up and down with my breathing. That should happen in your back. Most of us have a certain part of our back that is not as flexible as it could be. When you feel the length, how does it curve back, and when does this happen?

Stretch a little longer—in length, in breadth, and in time. Don’t think of holding your breath longer—think of extending that length of your spine longer each time. Space it longer if you can. Now can you also go sideways instead of just up? Can you let that circular feeling open outwards through your shoulder blades and out into your shoulders? It goes up and opens and fans out. See if you can get energy out through your shoulder blades, as far as your shoulders. It should affect your back, and the upper parts of your arms. Each time, keep returning to the beginning of the breathing circle.

Tai ji has often been misunderstood by people observing it. They see a straight spine and ask, “How come your back is so stiff?” If your back is stiff, you are practicing tai ji incorrectly. This circular movement may not show so markedly, but your back must have the continuation of this flow. The next time you expand your breath, see if you can let the shoulder blades lift, and let the arms float forward and up just a little bit . . . and then come down. As you expand, keep this flow moving out, and then when you recoil, just pull back into yourself. Let the movement begin in your chest and shoulders and flow out into your arms. Don’t begin in your hands.

We are doing this sitting; it is slightly easier when you’re standing. But standing and moving the legs properly is one of the most difficult things. The thigh usually hurts very much in the first few lessons of tai ji because of the tension of holding on. Sitting here, you don’t have to worry about the legs.

Begin with the spine, and lift up in this breathing expansion. Your arms will begin lifting up at the shoulders and this lift will flow

into your arms. Your arms will lift slowly until they are almost horizontal. You can think of a horizontal energy that keeps lifting your arms until they are level and then goes out through your fingertips. When your arms begin to sink down, imagine that the space underneath your arms is a soft, uneven supporting surface, like moving water. Feel this surface moving slightly and supporting you as you balance on top of it. As your arms sink down and come back in toward your body, allow the upper part of the arm to come in first, and then pull the rest back. Let the fingertips trail behind, as if flowing behind the upper arm and shoulder. As you settle, you will have the sense of sinking and the unity of a flowing curve. Don't worry about watching the length and height of your arm gesture, as long as it has this flow action. And also don't take it literally when I say level. It's like the water surface: It slants and tips and curves when you move, but all of these curves are only small departures from the straight level line. So don't say, "I've got to stay completely parallel." The whole idea is to *not* get limited.

Each time, you have to go through the whole sequence of this energy flow. It starts from way down here in your *tant'ien*, up through your chest and shoulders, and keeps expanding through and through as your arms rise . . . until you feel the energy come out of your fingertips and then the return happens. This is why just the feeling of this first rise and fall takes months and months to begin to learn in actual tai ji practice. The problem is that it can become very dull. You have nothing to hang on to. It's too bland—all you do is raise your arm. All of us are strong enough to raise our arms and put our arms down. The challenge is not the flashiness of the movement; the challenge is to get the feeling of one thing at a time—*now*. Each extension of the energy becomes that new moment. This is the most difficult movement of tai ji. All the other motifs are really just extensions of this first basic tai ji movement.

A good way to get the feeling of this movement is in a hot bath or a swimming pool. The water will support your arms more than the air because it has greater density. The next time you are in water, sit in

a cross-legged position, and just let your spine float upward like grass, like water weeds flowing up. Then let your arms float upwards, and let them rest on the substance of the water. Air also has its own density and space, and you can let the air around you support you in the same way.

This space around you is called yin space, in contrast to the yang space that is occupied by your body. I want you to feel your yang, physical self accepting the yin space—playing hide-and-seek with it. Be aware of the space around you as if it were water touching you. Look at me now, but look only at my outline, and the space around me. Let me disappear and see only the remaining movement in the air.

Now feel this yourself. Let your body disappear into the space/energy around you. You are resting on this space and being moved by it. There's nothing that you have to do or force. All your yang is settling, expanding, feeling. You enfold it all over, equally, smoothly. You feel like clouds, like steam, with its little tiny particles. You have a sense of almost getting lost within it, and then recapture an awareness of your own reality in that relationship. Both things are happening at the same time. In order to understand the yang, the solid, you must come to know the yin, the space around you. Learn to trust this energy and play with it.

Now as you are sitting here, just let your arms float up and then let the elbows sink down again. The entire movement is sequential. It really makes you go through all the parts of your body with this whole breathing/feeling process. Not one place is neglected. This is why tai ji is a healing exercise used to correct joint problems, or any other congestion or blockage that divides the body. When you practice tai ji, you become aware of where your body is stiff and divided, and you feel how you are misusing your body. You discover how your movement is fragmented, and you also learn how to move in a more flowing way so as to reconnect your movements into a smooth, easy sequence.

If you learn dancing or movement, your teacher will say move your arms. In tai ji I would say here's a space being moved by your

hands, or here are hands being moved by space. Tai ji energy is in *inaction*, by not doing. But when I say inaction in English it sounds like paralysis, instead of the happening that occurs when you stop doing things intentionally. With intention you think, “I have to do it,” and usually “I don’t want to,” or “I’m afraid I can’t,” so you soon get into conflict. Tai ji can bring you into a unity in which you don’t think, and movement just happens. When you really allow yourself to give in and open up, your whole body tingles, your pores seem to open, you get goose bumps.

It’s *both* the feeling of letting go *and* the feeling of awareness. It’s not one-sided. I could put on some nice music and say, “OK, let’s let go for a while, and pretty soon you will be relaxed.” That’s like providing you a big bathtub of pink bubbly champagne for you to submerge in and indulge in. That’s only a one-sided way of doing it. Tai ji doesn’t allow you that kind of license to say, “OK, I’ll just have a good time dancing.” I want you to enjoy it, but at the same time I want you to be really aware of what you’re doing. In tai ji, there’s an outside and inside awareness together. It does not have that kind of introversion that so much meditation has.

Now try this same beginning arm-lift sequence while standing. As the arms come down, let your legs go into the flow. Imagine that you are standing on water, and let your base become soft and yielding. You see, I ask you to think of the yin space as if it were more solid, and to think of the yang space as if it were more transparent. This is a readjustment of space which you can work with wherever you are. Think of your feet extending beneath the floor. Sometimes we use the imagery of having roots spreading down into the ground. It’s as if the sole of your foot is really testing where you’re standing, and you feel this from your center.

Now close your eyes for a minute and let your body go slightly lopsided. Don’t worry about falling. Shift your weight from one leg to another. Be insecure at first, and then just go with the movement of this imbalance. Just keep going with the curve and it will eventually find its way back to center. The circle gets smaller and smaller, and you



get closer and closer to yourself as you settle down. You have to do this with resilience in your legs—without tightening your knees, without pulling your thigh muscles, without blocking your calf muscles. Let your joints flow, and just sort of roll and rock around. Imagine that you're in the middle of a wave.

I spoke to three surfing champions from Hawaii who watched the tai ji group working and they said, “Hey! that’s interesting—this is exactly what we have been working on. We have developed a surfing yoga and that’s exactly what we’re doing.” Those of you who have done surfing, you *know*. How can you stay on the surfboard without constantly letting the body give with the wave? Try this while standing on a waterbed, and then walk on it. It’s something you cannot fight: You must *give in* to it and *then* you can begin.

You have to have the patience and willingness to give in before the real sense of tai ji comes through. The difficult part of the practice is how long can you sway around and keep doing this first arm-lifting movement before you get bored and want to go on to some other movement? How do you stay with it? If you begin to think this is too slow and is not working for you, just imagine doing *zazen* in a Zendo. This is like flying compared to *zazen* where you just sit in lotus position with your back straight. Even *zazen* is not really a solid-set stillness; it’s really a moving stillness. You are breathing and you feel that marvelous thin line flowing upward and that settling back down into center. You are moving into stillness.

Now let’s experiment with this moving in a somewhat different way. As you sway around, move your arms a little from your shoulders and rotate your torso from right to left and back. Let your arms swing freely and flop against your body. Notice how the shoulder swing affects your base. Do a swing, and then just before the end of the swing, begin to rotate back in the other direction. Rotate and swing out until you feel the pull in your arms, and then slow down. This swing really helps you to sense how the movement of the upper body is connected through the spine and down into the pelvis.

When you pull back, see if you can feel the back settling down,

pulling the arms back sequentially, with the fingertips last. Swing into it, and pull back. As you swing out, your body is slightly lopsided. When you pull back, find the middle and then let the arms flow out to the other side so you can feel the sense of the circle. As you do this swinging, you will find that your weight shifts on your feet. As you swing to the right, most of your weight comes off your left foot. Actually pick up this unweighted foot, and then set it down again as you swing back. Each time you give in to a new base.

So far, we are still keeping the pelvic area pretty steady. Allow some movement in the hip joints and thighs. If you pivot from side to side, you feel that your spine rotates with this movement. You have to make adjustment with your whole foot, keeping contact with the floor so you don't feel unsteady.

Now let's use these ideas in the movement called Embracing the Moon, or carrying the tai ji sphere. Imagine that you are carrying a soapy, slippery sphere about the size of a basketball in your hands. Play with holding this slippery ball and tip it around. If you hold it too tightly, it will slip away, and if you hold it too loosely, it will fall. As you move it around, your balance will change and you will have to shift your base. Make adjustments with your base without thinking which foot you have to move. Get into the feeling of the imagery. Give the sphere weight if you need to. Pantomime, and imagine that you're holding something very heavy.

As you shift around, your weight has to be adjusted on your legs. Do this without thinking which foot must move next. Curve out, and move back in a loop. It's not "Go there—and then come back." It is the whole circle: Loop, and back, and loop again. It's a circle that you can feel within: In relationship to your legs, in relationship of one arm to another, in relationship with the floor. Continue to just play with this sphere a little longer.

Now let this sphere slowly increase in size until the whole front of your body contacts the surface of this soapy sphere. Continue to move with the sphere touching the inside of your arms and the front of your torso and legs. The whole tai ji movement starts with the sim-

ple understanding that your body is the center of your energy sphere. Your body, with awareness of its different parts, all comes together as a center in moving circular motion. All the different movements of the tai ji chuan are variations of this flowing circular movement. Sometimes it is a small circle, sometimes it is large, sometimes the circle becomes a long elliptical curve, returning back in a double loop like a figure eight.

If you play with variations of this tai ji sphere, you can discover for yourself all the movements that are part of the form. You discover how all these variations have the same kind of flow, and how each movement continues easily into another.

I don't want to show you the form of tai ji chuan too early, because you will probably only see the structure, which will confuse you. You will only build up more tension, trying too hard to control and imitate the shape. You have to work through the feeling of your body gradually, allowing the form to emerge and become you. Tai ji is an art: not to be taught, but to be experienced. You can always learn a form later, after you get into this circular flow. Each teacher has a slightly different form, a slightly different way of doing tai ji. You don't have to believe me or any master. Your own practice will tell you what feels right to you. I want to show you how much pleasure I can derive from what I do, and how I understand and remind myself about the essence of tai ji.

I learned many many forms of tai ji when I was a child. We were moving from one village to another, running away from the Japanese-Chinese war. In each village there was someone who did tai ji, and I did tai ji with him. As a child I didn't concern myself with whether he was the "best" master, or whether he was famous, or would give me a certificate. I just did it with whoever was there. Any form is only *one* expression of the essence of tai ji, so don't get stuck with only one part of the whole. If you limit yourself to the structure of any one form, you will lose the essence.

Later I will gradually show you some short sequences and motifs, which will give you a structure to work on, something to practice.

When you come out and practice with me tomorrow, begin with awareness of movement outside, and movement inside your body. Use the ocean, use the wind blowing, become aware of your breathing. See if you can begin to move *from the sense of where you are*. Follow that beginning of energy and go with it.

Now let me just see you try to begin. Let your body settle into your base. Then sway a little, and discover where you are. Make adjustments of your feet, and then get together and centered. At the same time, don't plant your feet down. The minute you try to say, "This is a nice spot to hang onto" you are stuck, like a nail. You must feel the movement underneath your feet, as if you are walking on the ocean. Feel this lift of energy through the expansion of your breath and the extension of your body happening together. Then work towards the lift of the arms from your back and shoulder. When the arms lift up, let them rest on a surface that is uneven and moves like the waves of the ocean.

When you get the feeling of this flow, play with the tai ji sphere. Use the inside of your hands and arms to form the shape of the sphere and then begin to move it around. Keep the sense of the sphere as you play with it and let it change slowly. Let it grow large or shrink small. You may extend one side of the sphere into a longer curve as if the sphere became a long egg-shape. You may bring it sideways, making it a little lower. You may lift it up a little higher, or let it move around you. Be sure to always bring this curve back in so you don't lose contact with your center.

Keep your spine in the middle, so you always have a place to return to. This is like in kundalini yoga, the serpent, that fire energy that keeps moving in your spine. That feeling of one spinal disc at a time keeps moving and falling in a circle, so you know where your center is. If you bend your back, if you move outside your center, then you don't know where to return. You have to keep that torso as a reference point.

You must maintain a sense of your connectedness as you do this free-form moving with the sphere. Keeping centered means that you

realize that this particular arm movement is related to your center *this* way. That particular leg opening out that way is related back to your center, *this* way. So you have something to retain as you move. That's to keep you from falling into your pink, bubbly champagne bath and just having a good, lazy time—you may become so relaxed that you feel immobile, and pretty soon you fall asleep. Tai ji should awaken you; you keep this centeredness and connection in your self and your surroundings.

Do you see everybody around you? Do you see the chairs, do you see the floor, do you see the person next to you? Keep your ears open, too. Do you hear the feet shuffling? Do you hear the talking in the next room? Do you hear your own breathing and the person's breathing next to you? Keep that alertness open all around, without losing your center. This is the tai ji meditation. If you do it this way, then the form will continue to challenge you; it will become spontaneous with the human body movement as you go through the process. It's very easy to begin, if you *let* it begin that way. It's very difficult to stay with; it's so easy to get lost. That's why we have the form.

Early morning, before breakfast, is a really good time to do tai ji. As you begin, you can do deep breathing and then extend that breathing into movement. Every time you begin, you have to recapture that center all over again. Even after you practice quite a bit, there's no safe place where you know "I can always begin there." You can't depend on past experiences or an accumulation of them. You always begin right here, where you are, with your sense of yourself and your surroundings now.

My ideal of this workshop is that in some way we can recreate that process of the old masters who created the original tai ji. How did they do it? If you can experience one part of this original individual creation, maybe something will come out of *you*. Then the tai ji is yours. It's *your* tai ji chuan.





## CHAPTER II



Whatever I say to you is either a repetition, a reaffirmation, or a new attempt at this moment to relate to you what I'm trying to do. It's a new experience each time. I want to sense what you begin to feel, and what part of you wants to work now. I'm not always right: Sometimes I tune in with a couple of you and leave the rest of you out. Certain things mean more to one body than another. But in a week's time, we'll do many things, and somehow I'll get to all of you.

All these things we are doing illustrate one main point: The continuity of letting one movement lead smoothly into another without any breaks, hesitations, or sudden changes. But how can we bring about this coordination in the body? There's no use to follow the whole sequence of tai ji chuan and imitate all the motions. If I saw everybody go out on the deck and do it in unison, I wouldn't say "Bravo!" I would say "How sad." So many people just go through the motions mechanically and that's the end of true creativity. I would be unhappy to see that happening to tai ji movement. Tai ji may look from the outside like a pattern or structure, but what is happening inside the



body must be very different. Tai ji is neither a set structure nor chaos. Not this. Not that. It is a different kind of organization which cannot be known by learning a set of patterned movements.

This is why I told you in the beginning that I'm not going to give you forms immediately. This relieves some of your anxiety because you don't have to worry about copying or repeating the movements exactly. I could teach you like some teachers who begin with details and stances. "OK. Let's begin from the beginning. Here is position one. OK. And you say, 'How far should I raise my arms?' About here. OK. It's too high. Lower them two inches. Part two: You turn your right wrist 90° and move to the right. Now move the left hand over the right, and move your foot exactly 45° to your right. You put your toe down, lift your heel and touch."

This kind of teaching seems to me like putting on another straitjacket. Always you are worrying about what to do next, always thinking. You do too much thinking already, and this thinking always interferes with the flow of your movement. You don't have to prove to yourself or anybody else that by the end of the week you have learned a certain amount. The minute that you have a goal, you keep thinking about that, and then you're really not doing what's happening here.

Many people learn tai ji just so they can show it off to somebody else. They learn certain movements from the outside, but they miss the inside, the essence. And some tai ji teachers also have made this mistake. I can't identify with a lot that I hear about tai ji. When people come to me and talk about tai ji, I often have this double reaction. Either I have to just keep listening to them until I find some common ground with them, or I may have to go the other way—maybe I'll have to say I'm *not* a tai ji teacher. I have already eliminated the word chuan from tai ji chuan for this one reason. The chuan is the form. It means literally "a fist," a hand, the art of fighting. Tai ji chuan means "The movement phrase that is used for defense, for practice of your body/mind, based on the idea of tai ji." Tai ji itself is a much more open, inclusive term.

Tai ji is also a meditation. Meditation does not require isolation. You can meditate now. We are meditating if we really hear each other speaking, if you hear what you are saying yourself and hear the pounding of the surf out there. I hear you, I sense you here, and this awareness process is meditation. This process quiets you down and opens you up. Sometimes you have to make a special point to meditate more immediately, more effectively, because of your need. If you really have a very hectic day with things pulling you all over and unbalancing you, then it is useful to retreat temporarily in order to return to your center faster. You meditate, you try to give in and receive what is happening within you and around you.

At other times it might be much more useful to shout and move. I remember working as an architectural draftsman one summer in a big office building. I was in a glass cubicle with the boss observing every move I made. I used to go to the bathroom as often as I could, and when nobody else was there I would scream and dance and swing and jump up and down. Then I would feel much better and I could come back and work for a while. I also used to ask to be the errand boy when something had to be delivered to another building so that I could walk and move.

Tai ji shows that there is no such thing as absoluteness. When you accept this, then you begin. Tai ji is the experience you have as you are searching. People say, "I am searching for truth." Intellectually you are searching for truth, but what is truth, what is wisdom? *Wisdom is that particular emergence from your own spontaneity of an identification with what you know of the universe around you.*

Most of the time, we move. Now you notice, watching me, I'm not talking without any movement. In fact, I move a lot. I'm a moving person; I have a lot of energy that has to be expressed. I'm a very energetic person, and I throw myself around a lot if I don't practice tai ji. There is nothing wrong with throwing yourself around, nothing wrong with that other side of the energy which is the same as calmness.

The minute you use two words, there seem to be two different

things. He's moving; he's quiet. Tai ji integrates these two extremes. When you meditate, you realize you're moving and being quiet at the same time. Your energy is furiously moving, extending, feeling, while your physical self is settling down quietly. Watch a potter centering the clay on the potter's wheel. You see that furious motion of the turning—yet the clay seems not to move; it doesn't budge because it is centered. It's right there, as if it's standing still. Potting is clearly a Zen art.

Zen, or *ch'an* in Chinese, means “solitary person's heart and mind opening to awareness of the sign from heaven.” Tai ji is Zen, is *dhyana*, is meditation, is yoga. These are all different terms for the same kind of path, the same way of being. The only way you can identify your *own* feeling of what yoga, or Zen, or *dhyana*, or tai ji is all about is through your own experience. It's there. You don't have to put it into words.

Tai ji has a particular flow pattern. But if you pick up a tai ji book, usually it has a series of poses and a lot of little footprints in the directions. It reminds me of Arthur Murray's old dance manuals with footprints on the floor, for doing cha-cha-cha and tango. People never could learn to dance through the Arthur Murray dance books, so finally they had to pay their fee to go to the dance school. You cannot learn movement that way, because you try to fit yourself into that rigid, fragmented pattern. Because of teaching problems, most masters count the sequence of tai ji *chuan* in numbers. “This is movement one; this is movement two.” Basically, this is all wrong, and I've been trying to teach tai ji somewhat differently.

Tai ji is a very simple movement pattern. You play with your base and you begin to discover all the variations of the movement; then you allow that circular flow to take you in different directions, and then you revolve, and finally you come back almost to the original spot where you began. This is an important point: Tai ji must help you to come all the way around. It's that cycle, that journey that takes you and somehow brings you back again—without saying, “forty-five degrees that way, two steps forward, etc.” So right away you know all

your anxiety of trying to get somewhere is futile. Why do you want to get somewhere? You come back to the same place anyway! We all smile because we know this is true.

You come here for a week; you pay quite a bit for the facility, and for some of my fee. This is money you could have used for a lot of other things, but you make a sacrifice to come. You want to get something to take with you. And you *will* retain something, in spite of yourself. But if you keep trying too hard, you will get in your own way. I teach dance, and sometimes I see a student writing notes like mad. “What do you do with those notes?” He says, “Well, when I go back and teach my students I forget, so I have to take notes.” I say, “Why don’t you spend time in practice so you can *do* it? The notes will not help you to *do* it when you go back.” There are many, many people who want to rely on something which is really behind them or in front of them, not *now*. Tai ji is now, the same as gestalt therapy, the same as a lot of techniques that stress immediacy, and immediate response, so you can really dig into what’s happening at this given moment.

I would like to try one thing with you now. Pair up and face each other. Sit cross-legged so you’re close enough to each other to be comfortable. I would like you to hook your right arms and hook your right hands together. This is a double helix which gives a nice close-fit feeling without strain. Cup your left hand under your right elbow so that your elbow stays relaxed. Take some time just to get into the feeling of your touch: Feel the warmth and the texture of the contact. See each other and try to blend the looking with the physical connection between you.

Go beyond the distinction of the particular structure of the face, the forehead, the color of the eyes, the nose, the mouth—look at the total feeling of it, instead of particular details. See if you can get a feeling of the whole look. Take it in until it’s not a strange face; it’s a face that you really know, that really reflects you. You can do this same experiment alone with a mirror.

Check your shoulder tension, check the grasp of your hand. Feel the inside of your hand—there are another person’s fingers. They

are there moving a little bit, and you must allow that movement to be. At the same time there is some feeling of the other person's energy coming through there from his body. Make a circular connection through seeing and listening and touching. If you feel like blinking, go ahead and blink—don't try to keep your eyes open.

Now check to see if you are breathing easily. Maybe you could let go a little more and breathe a little more so that your shoulder and forearm become more free. See if you can feel each other's breathing through the hand and arm connection. Can you feel the gentle heaving of your torso? Do your thighs move a little when you breathe? Are you connecting in a very easy, relaxed way?

Sometimes I use the image of a flower in a mirror. Let's contemplate that image. Whatever passes by the mirror is reflected impartially, and when it goes past the mirror, the mirror does not retain any image. There's no way of retaining or saving anything. You don't have to worry about leaving your mark on the mirror. The mirror image illustrates that mirror-mind, that emptiness that can take in whatever is there. If you simply reflect the other person as what he is or what she is, there's no prejudice, there's no way of seeing anything that could create self-consciousness. It's just a clear reflection. When somebody looks at you, you should allow that openness. There is no need to feel uncomfortable being observed.

We could also use the metaphor of the moon coming out and casting its image on the surface of calm water. When the moon goes behind the cloud, we don't see it any more. When the breeze comes and the water ripples and flows, we may see many, many distorted moons. But it's not the water's intention to reflect or to disturb the image. Water and moon and breeze and cloud are individual separate entities flowing, existing together as one, without any demand or need to say, "You must do this for me; I must do that for you."

Now lift your hand up and pull each other a little bit and feel this opposition. Extend your arms enough so that you feel that your whole arms are free to move. Now join your left arms in the same way. It's a very crossed feeling. I want you to unwind and untangle as you

move, without releasing your hands. This gives you a new dimension. It's like the two arms of a churning machine. You will have a feeling of being pulled and twisted around, but yet it's very centered and balanced.

Even within this restricted sitting position there is quite a wide range of movement possible. There's a folk dance in which the partners keep their hands joined throughout a long sequence of turning, twisting, and unwinding.

Now see if you can relax that grip; keep only a very slight touch, and continue to move. Discover your wrists and how they rotate. Now slow down a bit. Let your torso also move with the movement of your arms. Let your body rock on top of your base a little.

If you are holding your muscles in tension, your arms will be getting tired. Let go. This is a good time to talk about manipulation. When you begin working on a form, first you follow it, and then you begin to repeat it. The minute you think you've got it, then you begin to manipulate it with your preconceptions. This is why tai ji works so slowly. If you stay with that slow, now, happening, you don't have to remember if you have finished half a turn or half a curve, so you do not have the anxiety of thinking, "I must finish it in a circle." You are always there in the moment, and you let it happen.

Now as we're still sitting here, let's do the motif called the Cloudhand, or moving your hands like clouds. Let go of your partner's hands and move away from him.

The Cloudhand is basically a movement that stirs up your tant'ien energy upward and outward and then circles back. If we cut an apple in half, we see two smaller circles overlapping in the center. Your spine is like the core and your arm motion is like the two overlapping circles.

Each hand, in turn, scoops up energy from the tant'ien and rises up the center line of your chest before turning outward, revolving, sinking downward, and curving back to the tant'ien. Then the other hand picks up the motion of the first and goes through the same cycle. Your torso pivots to follow the hand as it turns and revolves outward and downward.

As you do this, think of using your body in a functional way. Scoop up space as you lift your hand. As you begin to turn, let the space spill out and run downward like water. Then your shoulder and elbow get heavy, and as your elbow sinks, the hand trails behind the elbow and rotates. The hand revolves to face outward and downward in a slow stroking motion that circles back to the *tan'ien* and comes to rest as the other hand picks up the movement.

Vary the range and the scope of the movement. Try turning only a little, and then as far as you can easily turn. Do it large and small, high and low. Let your hands float all over and around you. Explore all the possibilities contained within this simple movement. As long as the movement flows easily and continuously as you curve and rotate, you are fine. As you continue your practice, all these many different movements will gradually condense into what is called moving hands like clouds—that beautiful rotation resolving into another beginning, followed by another rotation resolving into yet another beginning.

If you understand the *principles* of the movement, you will not get stuck in worrying about the irrelevant *details*—how large it should be, or exactly when to begin turning, etc. If you only pay attention to details, you will feel awkward and confined. The minute you feel confined and you stop to think, then the flow gets stagnant and polluted. Pretty soon your movement becomes dead and looks as if you are only trying to copy the master's instructions. If there is any rule in the learning process of tai ji, it's the minute that you feel confined into anything, get out of it first, and then flow back into the form once more.

Now let's stand up and work on the feeling of the base and legs, and then we'll combine this with the Cloudhand. First just get in touch with the feeling of your legs under you. Your knees should be slightly bent so that you settle down toward the earth more. Now walk around slowly and turn your body as you walk. Tai ji teaches you not to transfer your weight too suddenly, and to always keep your base between your legs. There are a few movements in tai ji that require you to stand on one leg, but basically your weight stays centered between your

legs, ready to move in any direction. You always use the easiest, most efficient way of carrying your weight. Whether you spread your legs wide or bring them close together, your base should always be between them.

Now slow down your steps as you continue to move and turn, and focus your awareness on the feeling in your feet. Do they clunk down like bricks, or do they reach down to the ground? Often you see tai ji practiced with the heel always touching first. The reason for that is to help you to really roll the foot down slowly using one part at a time, so that you can thoroughly feel your contact with the ground. You use the whole bottoms of your feet and make them soft and resilient. Rolling your heel down first is a good way to glide into it and still keep your weight in the middle. The whole foot, including the toe, should grasp the ground with an intimate, sensitive contact as if it were a hand. You don't touch the ground by just tapping with your heel and pointing with your toes. You don't ignore or resist or fight the ground; you welcome it and sink into it.

Imagine that you are on unsafe ground. There are thorns sticking up here and there, so that if you just clunk your foot down and put all your weight on it, you're going to get stabbed. Some of the ground is slippery and small rocks may make your feet roll out from under you. You're always feeling and sensing, and always ready to change and adjust. You should feel that you are carrying your weight in the middle, in the region of your pelvis. If you feel that you are carrying your weight only on the ball of the foot, then you will move differently and your leg will get tired. Your feet and legs should have a sense of taking in and feeling the ground. This is why primitive dancing and Oriental dancing often have a low stance and a sense of really liking the ground. This kind of movement is much more human and naturally aware of its connection with the earth. This is the opposite of most ballet dancing in which the dancer tries to touch the ground as little as possible for a theatrical and ethereal effect.

Now think of your base as if your legs are just part of a flexible pedestal, or an amoeba-like tree trunk that goes out to the ground in



all directions from your body. Your weight is being carried on all sides, not just on your legs or in front; the back and sides are just as important. When you move in this way you very rarely get yourself cross-legged or unstable.

What we're doing is to reacquaint ourselves with something that is very basic, like breathing, that we normally don't have to worry about. People who have respiratory diseases often have to go to a clinic and spend hours to re-learn how to breathe properly. When we find that our bodies are not moving as naturally as they could, then we have to take time to re-learn the natural way, the easy way of moving functionally. This kind of practice should happen all the time. Tai ji needs to be practiced daily in your own movements; it's not something separate that you do only in the morning.

As you move around now, be aware of the space between you and other people and objects. Your awareness of this space and others' movements should affect you somehow, and modify your movement. You turn and move differently when you are related to the space and the objects and the movements around you through your awareness and responses to them. If you walk by a window, you may slow down as you look outside. If you move into an open space you may extend your arm farther. You are experiencing the changing events around you, and also the constant feeling in your own center as you move and respond. Tai ji is the awareness of the constancy within all this change. Your awareness of what you are doing, and how you are responding and opening up to outside events develops into a whole, more fully complete movement than what you alone can do.

When you feel natural and comfortable simply moving around with a good solid base, try pivoting and turning and continue to move in gentle curves. Now incorporate the Cloudhand arm movement with your turning and stepping. In the tai ji chuan, the Cloudhand travels only to the left. When I play with the form, I reverse it and go to the right as well. It's a very nice feeling and I don't feel so lopsided.

Once you get into the feel of the rotation and revolution you can just allow the energy of the movement to carry you as far or as

little as it wants to go. Most teachers ask you to do the Cloudhand as a very small subtle gesture. I like you to try it large. I want you to feel the connection through your whole body. After you get the feeling of this big movement, then you can let it slowly diminish in size and still keep the flow as the gesture becomes more subtle.

I have a friend who took a film of an old master in Taiwan by the ocean. It's very beautiful. I may be able to do more fancy things—I have certain skills and a strong body—but that old man has a subtlety, with so many more years of practice, that I can't possibly match. So right away, there's no comparison. There's no way of saying, "Your way is better than mine." There's no such thing.

The form slowly crystallizes and settles into what you know. After many years of practicing, when you really know tai ji and you have done so many curves with your arms, you will be able to do a gentle crystallized small curve and make it look like ten million large waves going around. You will have discovered the simplicity of the curve in your body. But if your master, after sixty years of experiencing the form, does a simple flick of the wrist and says, "You do that. Turn, flip, do that. Keep doing this"—that is superimposing upon you that sixty years of doing large circles that developed into this tiny little form which looks so exquisite. Unfortunately you can only put it on the shelf and admire it; it can never become you that directly. You can only do the circle for years until it becomes smaller and smaller and more crystallized—until finally this flick of a wrist becomes that beautiful circle for you. That's the reason for my approach to doing tai ji: to really get into the feeling of it and at the same time realize that you're at the periphery of the form.

When you practice, you are there in the focal center. You can go either this way or that way as you please. When you are most centered, you can feel both directions of the circle simultaneously. So when you do Cloudhand, think of extending your curve one way with one hand, and then carrying on to the turning curve. When you have your base a little wider, you can shift your weight more easily.

I like to let the center of my palm rise about level with my eyes,