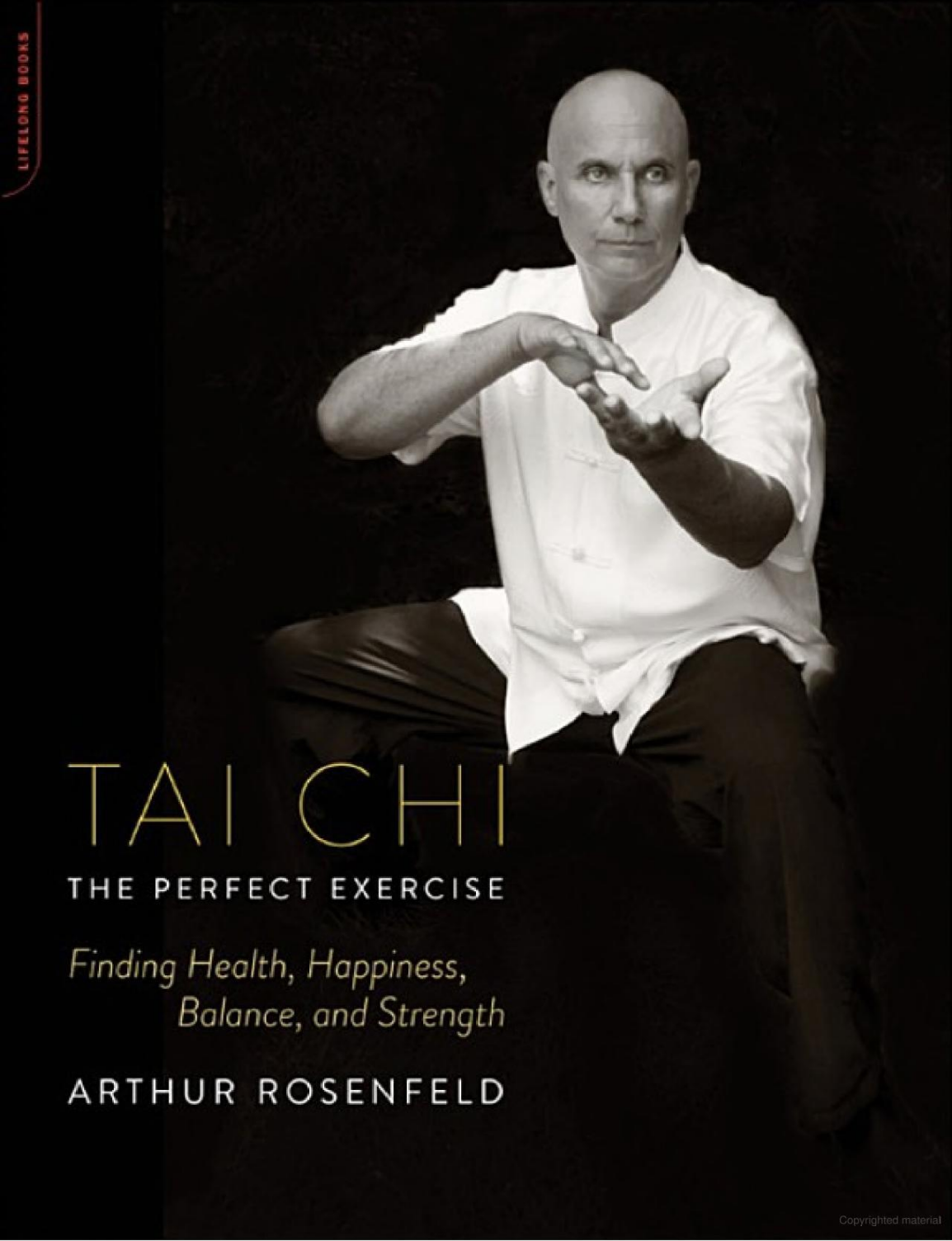
LIFELONG BOOKS



TAI CHI

THE PERFECT EXERCISE

Finding Health, Happiness, Balance, and Strength

ARTHUR ROSENFELD

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Grandmaster Chen Quanzhong and Master Max Yan

PREFACE

This book is a doorway into a world of physical magic and intellectual wonder. There is a great "stickiness" to the art of tai chi, a beguiling, pervasive quality that leads this quiet, wise, and introspective practice to seep inexorably into our consciousness. During the course of sustained practice, the borders between the old world we think we know and the new one we have just engaged grow increasingly blurred. Eventually, there is no border at all, and we are left with both a completely new way of looking at the way things work, and a new way to experience life.

Tai chi's pulsing, coherent, underlying intelligence fosters a sensitive and aware frame of mind, thus opening us to forces, trends, and patterns both inside our body and in the world around us. Practicing tai chi allows us to see and feel things differently on a physical, intellectual, emotional, and energetic level. It is the perfect art for the seeker—the person who has an abiding sense that contrary to the shallow, hurried model we're asked to embrace, there exists a deep, resource-rich alternative.

Growing up in New York City during the 1960s—a time in American history that was a veritable ballpark of ideas—I became such a seeker. Right from the start I found it very hard to believe and accept the values, priorities, and "facts" others took for granted. I was a weak kid, often sick and bedridden. Barred from the benefits of physical activities or sports—including the endorphin rush that makes exercise so pleasurable—I sought comfort in ideas that might help me better enjoy my world. Figuring that philosophers better understood what was really going on than anyone else, I engaged the works of Socrates, Plato, Russell, Buber, Sartre, Fromm (a family friend), and Hume, as well as Buddhist sutras, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Zen of D.T. Suzuki, and more.

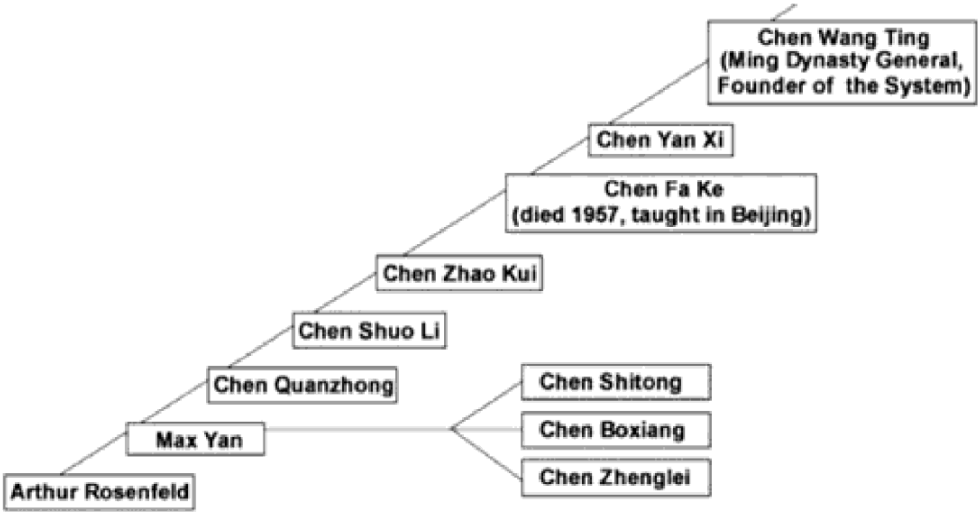
Frequent intervals of illness were punctuated by intervals of cautious activity, but because I was overweight and chronically out of shape, gangs mugged me every few weeks on the streets of a far rougher New York City than the one that exists today. I had grown up keenly aware of unfairness and injustice, having lost a large chunk of my family to the Holocaust, and thus found both violence and threats of violence particularly difficult to tolerate. I began to entertain revenge fantasies, and gradually grew interested in the martial arts.

Film star Bruce Lee's philosophical aphorisms and David Carradine's contemplative rendering of a warrior monk in the television series *Kung Fu* suggested to me that martial training might help me create a better world for myself and those around me, and also help heal my body. Eventually I started to train and thereby became more confident and less fearful, more introspective and less extroverted.

During the ensuing thirty-three years I studied Western wrestling, Korean martial arts, Japanese fighting systems, American self-defense styles, Chinese performance disciplines, and finally, and exclusively, tai chi. That path shifted my focus from

building strong muscles and good flexiblility to developing a sensitivity to the existence of energy and its flow—in martial arts terms from external to internal work.

I am privileged to enjoy a direct connection to the Chen family, which invented tai chi in the once-remote Chen family village, Chenjiagou, in Henan Province in the north of China. This connection evokes the ethos and ethics of the Hong Kong cinema from which Bruce Lee took his production cues, for this is an art born of millennia of family tradition, of unimaginably rigorous and dedicated effort, of a connection to nature that bespeaks countless hours of silent observation spread over generations, centuries of battlefield testing, and the sacrifice of lives devoted to spiritual contemplation.



My secondary teachers are themselves members of the Chen family, while my primary teacher, Master Max Yan—a representative of a family so old it predates the formation of the nation we know as China—is an individual so brilliant and gifted he was trusted with knowledge by several Chen family masters. Some of these individuals were old enough to have used tai chi not only as a tool for self-cultivation and longevity, but also as a self-defense system in war. They were and are the keepers of family knowledge, writers, holders of the family archives, and devoted sages who have chosen to maintain a low profile in the face of tai chi's increasing visibility, popularity, and political vicissitudes. I am grateful to them for their humility, their high spiritual caliber, and for the marvelous and specialized information on tai chi energetics, application, weapons, and philosophy they have shared with me.

In addition to freeing me from the suffering and constraints endured by so many in our modern, materially obsessed and spiritually bereft climate, Master Yan showed me a way to heal my body and clear my mind while simultaneously teaching me much about the world and my place in it. He also helped me to grow and to heal in ways I had not dared to hope I could. Where I had been inflexible, I became supple; where I

had been compromised, I flowered; where I had been delicate, I became robust; where I had been fearful, I became confident; where I had been quick to anger, I became patient; and where I had been overly consumed by my own welfare, I grew more and more compassionate and interested in the affairs of others. Over the years, tai chi has become my way of life.

What might this mean for you? Tai chi alters both the way we relate to people and the way we process events of our lives. Where once we saw differences if not opposition, we learn to see a nuanced, delicate interplay of opposing forces. Where once we saw only the surface of the pond of life, we become aware of constantly shifting, cyclical currents. Although tai chi requires no particular religious beliefs, practicing it can lead to a spiritual awakening, a sense of being part of a larger fabric of existence. As our inner life grows ever more luminous, the chatter of the speed-and-greed world slowly fades, leaving us with greater peace, tranquility, quiet, and contentment.

On a practical level, tai chi helps us to contend with the demands of career and family life with greater efficiency and poise. By simplifying the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and thereby getting in touch with our inner self, it helps us to better manage stress and anxiety and meet challenges more easily and without depletion. Unlike other physical activities, our tai chi tends to improve with age and time. Many older tai chi players (that is what we call each other) are able to perform feats that were out of reach when we were younger. Practicing tai chi, we age gracefully and with less drama, and we live longer, too.

Having been developed at a time when having trouble sitting still was neither an insult nor a symptom of some disorder, tai chi reveals to us the inalienable truth that our bodies were built to move, and that moving cures many of our ills. If sitting at a desk all day is the new smoking, then tai chi is the new yoga, offering us an opportunity to step out of contemporary culture's fast-moving river of modern life onto a stable, peaceful, natural island, a place where we can develop tranquility, relaxation, clarity, efficiency, and effectiveness. May this book serve as a bridge to that island.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

While *Tai Chi—The Perfect Exercise* is far from an encyclopedia and cannot hope to substitute for physical study with a qualified teacher, it does offer a range of content intended to serve both seasoned practitioners and those who are "interviewing" tai chi to see if it fits their transformational agenda. I have wherever possible avoided unnecessary reference to both ancient Chinese contexts and challenging terminology, instead addressing a range of concepts—from basic to advanced—in contemporary speech.

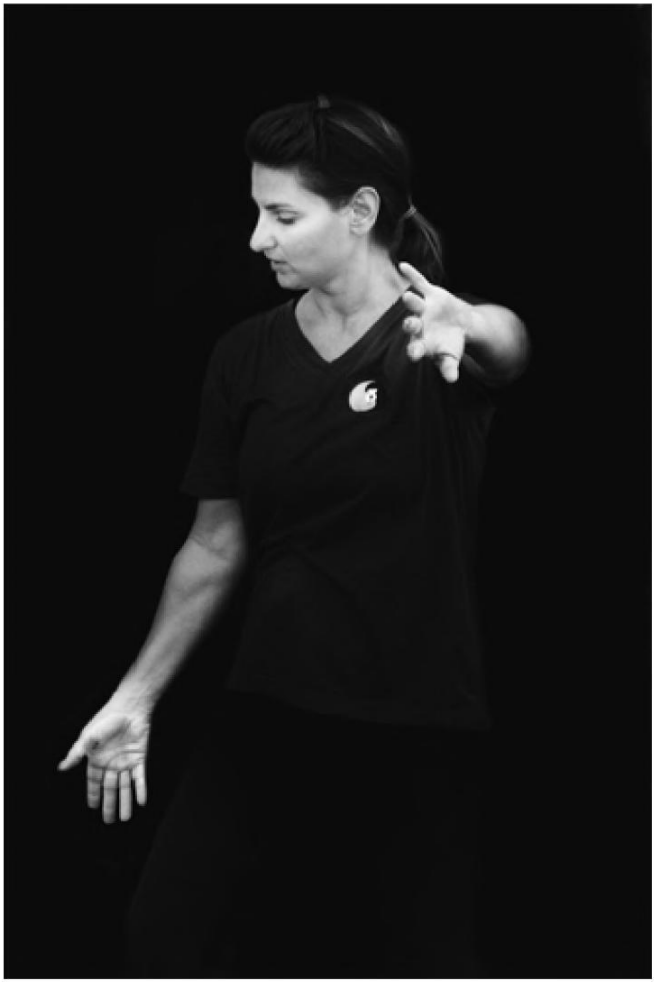
My first goal is to clearly explain how tai chi builds optimal health while facilitating a deep understanding of the workings of the human body. My second goal is to argue for tai chi's tremendous relevance in the modern world by showing how it deepens our understanding of the world and our place in it. Last but not least, I hope to clear up many myths and misunderstandings about the art, including some closely held by long-term practitioners.

Each chapter explores the movement, philosophy, and ideas specified in its title, and most provide exercises—termed "Explorations"—to deepen the understanding of the material offered. These Explorations draw on tai chi principles to lend insight into the practice and produce compelling benefits and results. They require no equipment save, in some places, small dumbbells. These explorations are not designed to teach tai chi, but rather issue a persuasive argument in favor of going out to find a teacher and class and then deepening and reinforcing what you have learned here with the help of your teacher. Presented in groups of three, each is more challenging than the previous so as to serve a range of age and fitness levels. It is best to start with the first exercise, practice it daily for a week or two, and then proceed to the next. Skipping an exercise, or even a day within your routine, means missing something: remember—tai chi is about the journey, not the destination.

Readers seeking tai chi's subtler dimensions, as well as practitioners already versed in the art, may wish to pay special attention to the sections labeled "Watercourse," a term from Chinese Taoist philosophy popularized by the mid-twentieth century philosopher Alan Watts, whose humorous and lucid explanations of Eastern concepts introduced to America a whole new way of seeing the world. All told I have presented a range of ideas that go beyond the details of the physical practice, hopefully providing plenty of "aha" moments along the way. The book is intended to be read as written, but jumping around throughout its pages can also be fun.

TAI CHI

THE PERFECT EXERCISE



That martial arts are a system of self-defense is self-evident, and the medical benefits of martial exercise [are] not a great leap. However, Chinese culture has taken the martial arts several steps further, merging them with meditation and inner alchemy, and finally presenting them as a path of ultimate self-realization through the Tao.

DOUGLAS WILE, *LOST T'AI-CHI CLASSICS FROM THE LATE CH'ING DYNASTY*, 1996

INTRODUCTION — WHAT IS TAI CHI?

Chances are good that you have seen tai chi in a neighborhood park. You may associate it with Asian people, pacifists, or aging hippies. You may also have heard that it is good rehab for heart patients and a fine way to manage stress. Perhaps you've been stirred by watching people practice tai chi with a sword, and inspired by how relaxed and precise they seem. You may even have seen tai chi on television, in Hong Kong kung fu movies and their recent Western derivatives such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Kung Fu Panda,* or even in the cartoon series *Avatar: The Last Airbender,* which draws heavily on the art. Yet for all the impressions you may have, and all the curiosity, too, you likely cannot imagine the truly transformative potential of this marvelous art.

Long ago, tai chi was a system of battlefield fighting. Today, tai chi is a perfect exercise because it conditions the body, grows the spirit, and strengthens the mind. It is also a means of personal expression for millions of people around the world, an exotic paintbrush that can produce works of art as deep, rich, surprising, and rewarding as the people who wield it. Yet tai chi is more than an art form, a physical exercise, and a wondrous lens through which to see the world; it is a philosophy that can be lived, a lifestyle through which we can realize high ideals, and a complete recipe for health, longevity, happiness, and power.

Why is this so? How can something that appears to the untrained eye to be an exotic anachronism—a slow-moving physical irrelevance in a fast-paced virtual world—in fact represent a complex of ideas and body mechanics far, far greater and deeper than mere meditative dancing? How, when it is seen by most Westerners as something elderly people do in parks, can tai chi perform the miracles it does, from ameliorating arthritis pain to providing solace for the soul, from increasing core strength and enhancing balance to lending a mixed martial arts fighter a rapier eye for an opponent's weakness? How can such a superficially benign art enable the weak and small to overcome the strong and large while also opening a portal into the way the natural world works? The answer is that the set of concepts and techniques that comprise tai chi sit on a specific and remarkable tripod. The legs of the tripod are Taoist philosophy, the traditional martial arts of China, and Traditional Chinese

Medicine (TCM).

TAOIST PHILOSOPHY

The Tao means the Way, and refers to an underlying force, intelligence, or cohering energy that pervades all that is. Taoism defines and dignifies us by virtue of our relationship with nature. To this day, many everyday folks, along with many priests, monks, and kung fu masters, attempt to follow the Tao, as do action heroes on both big and small screen, California surfers, Winnie-the-Pooh, and the film director/producer George Lucas, who, in his *Star Wars* movies, represented the Tao as "the force" and tai chi masters as Jedi knights.

Taoism recognizes cycles in all natural processes and appreciates the tension between opposites that makes our world what it is. These opposites are termed yin and yang. Examples include male and female, light and dark, up and down, Heaven and Earth, and rational and intuitive thought. When yin and yang are in proper balance—and unimpeded by certain typical qualities such as impatience, greed, impulsivity, self-centeredness, or self-delusion—a delightful, harmonious interplay occurs. The term for this interplay is tai chi, one that pertains to a philosophy and a lifestyle. The martial art that is the subject of this book is based on this harmonious exchange. The full and correct name of the art is actually tai chi ch'uan, where the word ch'uan means fist. This name denotes the fact that the most effective martial approach is to follow the natural balance of the universe.

In terms most relevant to tai chi, Taoism is expressed by a famous book presumed to have been written by Lao Tzu (an honorific that means Old Master) known as the *Tao Te Ching: The Classic of the Way and Virtue*. This short work discourses not only on the qualities of the superior man—the sage—but also upon the natural forces affecting our lives. The book suggests that the best way to hitch a ride on the running river of life is to be maximally effective with minimal effort. The Lao Tzu's early followers were woolly mountain men of the Middle Kingdom, Bacchanalian worshippers of nature who used herbs, meditation, and movement in pursuit of the Tao and in accordance with its rules. Such movements were closely related to the ones tai chi players now practice.

CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS

The tai chi tripod's second leg has a multi-thousand-year history of tried-and-true fighting techniques, whose interconnected influences have resulted in numerous beautiful martial arts styles. These are collectively known the world over—especially since the days of the film star, Bruce Lee—as "kung fu" or, more contemporaneously, wushu. The phrase kung fu means hard and focused work, and can be applied to anything—from violin practice to chopping wood—to which a person dedicates time and effort. Martial kung fu is the province of warriors, for whom physical health and fitness has always been of paramount concern. It was never acceptable for someone who lives and dies by the sword to feel physically unprepared for combat on any given day or in any given situation. If maximum fitness was not available at every moment, the warrior risked a bloody death on the dusty road. In those days, the link between your mortality and taking the best possible care of yourself was abundantly clear.

There was no debate about it, no conflicting social opinion trends, no magazines devoted to fitness and survival, no blog debates on efficacy or ethics, and no heated medical studies funded by companies selling health-related products.

Today, the link between exercise and health, while a topic of ever-growing interest, remains less immediate than it used to be. Health crises usually unfold much more slowly if no less dramatically than they did in the old days. Despite medical specialists, ambulances, and well-staffed emergency rooms, the death we risk in our modern society is often more protracted and prolonged than what an early warrior might suffer. Our modern healthcare system often allows us to survive abusing or neglecting ourselves. Still, if you seek self-actualization, personal fulfillment, and a long and happy life, being physically active is critical, and for some people self-defense skills can be a literal lifesaver.

Increasingly, kung fu training appeals to millions of people worldwide as a path to fitness and self-confidence. Unlike the many gym workouts primarily aimed at fashioning a beach or competition body, kung fu training emphasizes function over form. This is not to say "ripped" abs, "cut" arms, and "chiseled" buns cannot come from the training; rather, that the emphasis is on the way the body works more than on how the body looks. If you have in mind some old-style-kung-fu-movie-based notion of bells and buckets, bricks and ropes, rest assured that even in China, kung fu training has embraced all the modern tools and conveniences you find in any other fitness pursuit.

Some kung fu "styles" are named for the family that invented them, some for the regions from which they hail, some for their derivation from the movements of animals, and some for their association with legendary figures or mythic creatures. Regardless of their inspiration of geographic derivation, all are effective combat systems and rely more on sophisticated body mechanics and subtle body energies than on brute strength. These styles are broadly divided into northern Chinese and southern Chinese variants.

Northern styles show the influence of the famous Shaolin temple, and influences from Mongolia. Muslim fighting arts from what is now the Chinese province of Xinjiang are included in these battlefield systems, which feature the long-range weapons and long strikes born of conflict in wide-open spaces. Such arts prize strength, alignment, and connection to the ground, and are the source of their Japanese and Korean offspring, like karate and tae kwon do.

Southern styles of Chinese kung fu have a very different flavor. This part of East Asia is dominated by water, and where there is water, there are boats. Many formative-era conflicts occurred at close-quarters aboard ships, a platform for fighting that is by its nature unstable and restrictive. One cannot gallop with a lance in hand aboard ship, nor can one seek higher ground from which to dominate with devastating kicks. Southern fighting styles thus depend upon the opponent being at close range, and emphasize balance, stability, speed, and a keen sense of timing.

Tai chi belongs to a small, elite group of "internal arts" born of a mixture of the Northern and Southern attributes. Originally the province only of elite mercenaries and soldiers, it entails a program of physical training and the use of traditional Chinese weapons, and leads to superb physical and mental abilities. Internal arts emphasize softness over hardness, smooth movements, relaxation, sensitivity, and great control of balance, breath, and timing. The progression from so-called "hard or external"

muscular training to soft, sensitive movements occurs within many Asian martial arts systems, but tai chi emphasizes relaxed softness from the outset. Such training is challenging and, even for the most athletically gifted person, requires time and practice. Thus, police officers who need to learn to subdue suspects quickly, soldiers about to ship out to an active war zone, or residents of dangerous urban environments might find tai chi very useful for stress control, but ought not choose it to make them martially effective in the shortest possible time.

Just because tai chi isn't quick and easy to learn, however, doesn't mean it has no self-defense value in the first few years of study. Setting aside the degenerative diseases of aging that become the greatest threat to most of us over time, it is also true that the solid, centered attitude that a tai chi person exudes deters opportunistic predators and bullies alike. More, a great number of violent encounters are forestalled before they occur simply by virtue of awareness and planning. To this tai chi brings the sort of clear, relaxed thinking that can help avoid a needlessly inflammatory response to a threat. In the long run, while bolstering your health, building your body, enhancing your longevity, and offering a lifetime of pleasure and satisfaction, tai chi can actually make you an excellent fighter. In the process, however, tai chi spiritual development will also teach you that violence is the lowest common denominator of human interaction.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

Because tradition requires that a martial artist be able to heal the damage he or she inflicts, and because understanding the human body's intimate workings can lead to a useful martial understanding of its vulnerabilities, historically, many masters of the destructive arts were also capable healers. That is why the tai chi tripod needs its third leg, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), a 5000-year-old system of prevention, diagnosis, treatment and cure. TCM's deep reservoirs include an intimate knowledge of indigenous herbs, a finely nuanced understanding of the various cycles of fluid and substance in the body, and a familiarity with a term of subtle energy, called qi (pronounced "chee"), which Western scientists continue to study.

TCM's energy treatments, which manipulate qi using massage, acupressure, and acupuncture, are effective for both chronic and acute medical conditions. TCM's elaborate treatments for traumatic injury, which collectively fall under the name "bone setting," in some instances offer excellent alternatives to the standard of care in Western medicine, stimulating healing without surgical intervention, pinning, or the use of general anesthesia.

I have seen some amazing results from TCM, and these have flown in the face of the common perception that, while the system may be of some use for chronic conditions, it always pales in comparison to the miracles of modern Western medical technology in treating acute conditions. This view may not be the complete story. If I were hit by a bus, I would indeed prefer the life-saving techniques of Western trauma medicine to reattach my leg, stuff my viscera back where it belongs, and keep my heart pumping through it all. After that, though, I might well opt for an integrated approach that includes TCM.

My father, the world-famous cardiologist Dr. Isadore Rosenfeld, visited China in the 1970s and witnessed open-heart surgery conducted with only acupuncture

anesthesia, the patient awake and talking as the procedure was performed. His account of what he saw, published in *Parade Magazine*, created a small firestorm of controversy, in part because at that time, more so than today, acupuncture and other forms of TCM were perceived as voodoo medicine.

It certainly isn't voodoo. As my research for my documentary films substantiates, there is much that is real and effective about TCM, acupuncture included. Some years ago a physician and fellow tai chi player and I were visiting a bonesetter in Bamboo County, Guangdong Province, China. Bonesetters in China approximate chiropractors in the West, with a good dose of osteopathy thrown in. This particular master of the art was born to a bonesetting family know for its techniques, skills, and secrets. While I was visiting his clinic, a teenage boy was brought in fresh from a motorbike accident. He had a complex fracture of his arm, with many breaks and bones fragments out of line. Here in the West, repairing this complex injury would have required general anesthesia, surgery, and the insertion of pins.

Such advanced options are not often available in rural China. Instead, I saw the bonesetter begin his treatment by inserting a couple of needles in the injured arm. Instantly, the boy, who had been white from pain and clammy from shock was able to relax and smile. After that, the bonesetter put his hands on the arm, closed his eyes, and with great concentration began to literally reassemble the arm, gently lining up the major bones and guiding the fragments back into place on the basis of touch alone. He then wrapped the arm in something akin to cheesecloth and applied a poultice of herbs that hardened in place, creating a light cast. "Leave it on for a week," he told the boy, "then come back and we will put on another one, with different healing herbs." When he was finished, he took an x-ray to show my doctor friend, who studied the image carefully. "We couldn't do this at home," my friend said. "It puts us to shame."

BENEFITS IN A NUTSHELL

Having defined tai chi as a coalescence of philosophy, self-defense, and medicine, it's easy to imagine the art's benefits falling into related categories, and they do. Looking first at the health benefits, it's easy to be incredulous. Indeed, The Harvard Women's Health Watch says of tai chi, "This gentle form of exercise can prevent or ease many ills of aging and could be the perfect activity for the rest of your life."[1]

There is now so much evidence that the practice lowers blood pressure, aids in sleep, increases the immune response, improves flexibility and balance, strengthens the body's core muscle groups, improves focus and concentration, and is of benefit in easing a variety of disease states including asthma, insomnia, arthritis, chronic fatigue, Parkinson's, hypertension, and more. There is even work underway to document how tai chi alters the structure of our DNA! Impressive though these data may be, they merely hint at what tai chi can do for you, in part because there is always more investigating to do, and in part because that bedrock of Western medicine—the double blind, placebo-controlled study—has limitations when it comes to tai chi. That's due to the fact that such studies require an investigator to be able to identify and isolate variables that, in the case of tai chi, remain elusive and poorly defined. In short, it is difficult to find something when you know neither where or what it is.

Scrutinizing tai chi's benefits through the lens of Western medicine may actually lead us to miss the forest for the trees. That's because of Western science's fondness

for deconstructing things into their component parts so as to understand them on the one hand, and TCM's penchant for thinking in terms of relationships and systems on the other. In Western terms, we can say that unlike more common exercises such as tennis, football, baseball, jogging, golf, swimming, or cycling, tai chi is a mind/body practice of the sort that yoga is intended to be, offering benefits that transcend the purely physical. Intellectually understanding tai chi's philosophical concepts leads to a change of mind, and performing tai chi movements leads to a change of body. When the mind and body engage in a dialogue of hormones and neurotransmitters, the transformational effects of the practice are enhanced in an exponential way. In TCM terms, we can say that as a system, tai chi benefits the level and distribution of our energy by bolstering some dimension of movement here, some emotional and intellectual facet there.

In a very real sense, tai chi is a laboratory for the comprehension of Taoist principles, a refuge from the fray of life wherein to test one's understanding of balance, harmony, sensitivity and power. Such testing leads to growing of the inner self rather than cultivating a focus on external trappings, with the result that the world of emotions and sensations becomes more interesting than the external material frenzy of the modern world. The first step toward this reorienting is the removal of all unnecessary muscular tension from the body. This is a profound enterprise, because daily stress—a common manifestation of inappropriate tension—is well known to be the source of more doctor visits than any other single factor.

The second step in changing how we move through the world is to become more efficient and thereby tire less easily and accomplish more in everything we do throughout the day. Moving in this new way, our muscles grow stronger, our brain masters new patterns of perception and action, and our joints open in response to the spiraling energy patterns that are unique to tai chi. This overall process begins with the very first tai chi class and intensifies exponentially until the art takes up residence in our meat and bone.

The third step in transforming ourselves with tai chi is to achieve a harmonious mental state, which means learning to be keenly aware of our own emotions and to consistently take a deeper and more philosophical view of challenges. We come to nip negative thoughts and feelings in the bud and healthfully channel irrational exuberance. Rather than succumbing to the sticky pull of other people's problems, tai chi people navigate relationships relatively unencumbered by worry, lack of self-confidence, and misapprehension. The resulting cool balance is termed wuji (pronounced "woo-jee") and is one of the great goals and benefits of tai chi practice. The wuji mind deepens our vision, allows us to clearly see exactly what needs to be done, and specifically equips us to find creative solutions to conflict. In situations where one option, or door, is to meet force with force and a second door is to yield and be overrun, the wuji mind is often able to find a third door that represents a unique solution acceptable to both parties. Because such creative clarity often leads to compassionate action, people who do not study tai chi might term the third door a random act of kindness when it is more accurately a deliberate act of consciousness.

As a fourth benefit, tai chi builds physical energy. Physical work now seems less daunting to the tai chi person, who discovers a reservoir of strength that allows him/her to endure and prevail in many different situations. The particular fashion in which tai chi builds energy also harmonizes the interaction between the body's organ systems, allowing them (according to the TCM model) to enhance sexual essence. Many people

are drawn to Taoist exercises out of desire to increase their sexual enjoyment and performance, and they find that tai chi does wonders for their sex life.

SO WHAT DOES TAI CHI LOOK LIKE?

Tai chi practice typically consists of a series of movements brought together like pearls on a string. Some people call the movements "postures," an unfortunate word because a posture is static and tai chi is dynamic; without movement, tai chi does not exist. Taken together, the movements of tai chi are referred to as a "form." Some tai chi forms are performed slowly, others are quite quickly and vigorously. Performing tai chi feels simultaneously relaxing and powerful. It leaves the player with the sense that she is moving in accordance with human structure and the laws of gravity, leverage, and inertia. Whether done dreamily and slowly or quickly with martial intent, tai chi embodies strong grace.

Tai chi is as much a state of mind as it is a system of movement. Demanding presence and attention to every sensation and detail, tai chi flees the moment the mind wanders. The instant we think about the pizza we're planning to have for lunch, worry about whether the babysitter is into the wet bar, glance at the sky to track an impending thunderstorm, feel a chill in our spine about an upcoming exam or performance review, tai chi in its pure sense goes out the window. Let the mind slip away to an interlude with a lover, pop off to a happy memory of a tropical vacation or the best margarita we've ever tasted, and because tai chi is all about the mind/body connection, it's gone. Return to awareness of the present moment, feel our muscles, our connective tissue, our joints and our bones, and tai chi returns. Because it requires a completely inwardly directed consciousness, genuine tai chi is not a performance and should not be done with an audience in mind.

Geometricians and physicists know that the spiral is nature's archetypal shape, being found in galaxies, tornadoes, seashells, the flow of liquid through pipes (or blood vessels) and water exiting a drain. In recognition of this natural design, tai chi movements—particularly Chen style, the founding family's original art—characteristically describe spirals. Spiral movement is a sign of tai chi's Taoist origins, and accounts for the fact that many people watching tai chi say that in addition to looking exotic and graceful, the practice also appears organic and natural

Natural, however, does not mean easy. While tai chi is adaptable to fitness levels from wheelchair-bound patients to Olympic athletes and suitable from ages 12 to 112, the art challenges us at every level. Every student soon becomes aware that every movement has onion-like layers of depth and complexity. Watching tai chi in a local park, health club, senior center, or martial arts school, it will immediately become apparent—even within a single class—which players have been at it the longest. A seasoned tai chi practitioner usually exhibits smoother movements, seems more relaxed, may sink lower in his stances, and may perform strikes with percussive authority.

The original purpose of form practice was to test martial strength and alignment and to remain strong, rooted (more on this later), and relaxed in the kind of unpredictable situations a real-life battle might bring. In the battlefield of everyday life today, and with a focus on health and longevity, these beautiful movements function to enhance our balance, sensitivity, serenity, composure, and power. While the elderly

and infirm player can find plenty of benefit in performing tai chi gently and in a high stance, the fittest, strongest, most flexible athlete can crouch on one leg or go into deep and challenging stances. Form practice coordinates upper and lower extremities at every athletic level, all the while strengthening the body right down to the marrow.

As the tai chi onion suggests, traditional tai chi training follows a set curriculum. Each grade, or level, requires you to be able to do certain things. At the beginning, the focus is on relaxing the upper body, shifting the weight properly, and learning arm circles and stances. As the student's skill grows, the requirements become more demanding, traditional Chinese weapons such as straight and curved swords, spear, halberd, sticks, mace, and the long pole may be brought into play to build strength, increase mobility, sensitivity, and flexibility, and improve footwork and timing. Simplified tai chi will not include such tools, but if you find an advanced group at a park or martial arts school you may be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the art's martial roots.

BUT IS IT THE RIGHT CHOICE?

It is if we like the idea of developing our body and mind together. It is if we cherish function as much as form and love a strong muscular core. It is if we want sculpted thighs and a great rear end. It is if we want the toned upper body advanced tai chi training with partners and traditional weapons provides. It is if extreme forms of fitness training don't appeal (yet real power does), and if we take a long-term view of health. It is if we've always hated the gym but love to exercise outside. It is the right choice if we fancy a discipline that can be done competitively or as a deeply personal journey, wherever fate or fortune may take us, no matter our age, fitness level, or strength. It is the right choice if we find joy in learning about ourselves over time.

Tai chi is a good fit for us if we have the discipline to stay the course even when the training is difficult, trusting that there must be a reason why it has benefited millions of people for hundreds of years. It is a good fit if we have always been seekers, both for deeper ways of understanding the way the world works and for a better appreciation for how to use our body in sophisticated new ways we may not even be able to imagine right now. Certainly, tai chi is a good fit if we are always rushing around and wish, just for a few hours at least, that we could slow down and have time to more deeply experience life's intricacies, opportunities, and pleasures.

In the northern Chinese village where tai chi was invented, the art is taught to young children and enjoyed throughout all stages of life. In fact, in the many years I have taught and practiced, I have seen many students bust stereotypes regarding who is best suited to the art. It turns out that there is not much correlation at all between success in tai chi and advancing years, nor with youth and vigor, great athletic aptitude, coordination, stamina, flexibility, or strength. Tai chi develops all these qualities, but they are not required for a seat at the tai chi table. Indeed, neither is being Chinese, or having an intense interest in pugilism or Asian martial arts. Being a dancer, a cyclist, ball player, or swimmer yields no particular tai chi advantage, nor does proficiency at yoga.

The best predictor of future success in the art is the ability to embrace bewilderment. The first weeks and months of tai chi class can be a struggle for the kind of person who feels compelled to understand every detail of what they are doing. We

must be able to practice movements over and over, trusting that in time they will reveal their riches. In addition to swallowing doubts, it helps not to measure our progress against that of our classmates or against some imagined standard; there is little relationship between how quickly we master the exterior pattern of a movement and how competent a tai chi player we ultimately become.

Our love affair with tai chi—yes, over time many people do fall in love with the art—will carry us through those early classes where we are simultaneously lost in Chinese names and bedazzled by the grace and fluidity of a teacher's moves. Tai chi teaches us that life is not all about merely getting things done; we all know how it ends, so rushing through life is just senseless. If tai chi sounds like a long-term investment, that's because it is. The good news, however, is that the required commitment arises organically as it does in any relationship that is worth the time and effort. The art reminds us not to rush from one activity, project, or relationship to the next, as in the large sense all human endeavors are the same. It teaches us to be here now and treasure the journey over the destination. The art may even shake our inappropriate preoccupation with outcome and achievement, a fresh shift for many Westerners.

Tai chi is the right choice if the quiet intricacy and elegance we see when we watch a class appeals to us, if we feel the draw of an ancient, deep, exotic practice. It is the right choice if we want to connect to the world in new ways, and if we need new methods ways of handling stress and conflict. It is a good fit for us if we want to build mindfulness and purer attention, and if belonging to a community of people who are more spiritual than material sounds nurturing. In the end, tai chi is for us if we believe that anything worth doing is worth doing slowly.

WATERCOURSE

Effort and Effortlessness

In his *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu says, "The sage does nothing, but somehow gets everything done." With this phrase, he is trying to explain that his easy, natural way is the best route to accomplishing things—a freeway of sorts—even though most people would rather exhaust themselves climbing a steep mountain path because they believe that if no effort is required, the goal is unworthy. It is amazing how what was true thousands of years ago in China is true in America today; the notion that suffering and perseverance is somehow validating persists.

The relevance to tai chi practice should be clear. Nothing gets results faster than following the body's natural cadence and rhythm. There is no better way to make progress in the art than to become mindfully sensitive to the cues coming from our body, and responding to those cues with methodical practice. Pushing to the point of great soreness slows us down. Balancing the forces at work within and without our body is the straightest and fastest route to tai chi proficiency, even though we have been trained to think that pushing like a Navy Seal, lifting like a bodybuilder, and enduring pain stoically are signs of character.

This means that practicing moderately and consistently brings better results than training episodically but with extreme gusto. Concentrating on the quality of our relaxation, sinking, and turning is a better strategy than worrying about how many hours we put in. In tai chi we must remember that straining to overcome an opponent means we are doing something wrong. Rather than relying on muscular force we should rely on sensitivity and skill. Success should surprise us when it comes. Try too hard, force things along, and you are in the mountains when you should be on the straight, direct road. Tai chi is all about efficiency, effectiveness, and effortless action.

The soft and weak overcome the hard and strong.
TAO TE CHING, V.36 (HOLLY ROBERTS, TRANSLATOR)

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RELAXING INTO THE WORLD

Consumer culture, relentlessly negative media messages, and the unsustainable depletion of natural resources combine to make healthy choices hard to find. Sometimes we accept harmful lifestyle influences because we believe we have no choice; sometimes we unwittingly make choices that seem right at the time but are not in our long-term physical or spiritual best interest. We may, for example, deny ourselves sleep in favor of working to make money to buy things we don't need. Too, we may ignore a pain in our chest because we're more afraid of the cost of care than we are about our health.

Although we are biologically adaptable enough to live by the sea-coast, near a lake, in a forest, a city, or at altitude, we are also often prone to preoccupations and delusions that lead us to deny our spiritual, emotional, and physical needs. When we do this, we experience stress, which makes us tense and anxious. Our joints start to ache, our sleep and digestion suffer, and we may even become depressed. Tai chi is so effective at countering a multitude of stressful and unhealthy influences because it is built on the tripod discussed in the introduction—practical kung fu, Traditional Chinese Medicine, and Taoist philosophy. These elements are present at every level of the practice, from a single move to an entire training program.

When a system maintains its design elements at every level from the minutest detail to the most elaborate technique, we call it a fractal. To better understand the concept, let's consider the pyramid at Giza. If that famous monument were a fractal (it isn't), then if we drove a bulldozer into it, the boulders that broke off would all be shaped exactly like small pyramids. If we took a sledgehammer to those boulders, they would break into pieces that were even smaller pyramids. If we pulverized those small pyramids into dust and looked at them under a microscope, we would see tiny pyramids akin to the Giza giant in every aspect from density to proportion.

Our universe is full of fractals. It could be said, for example, that on the grandest scale, galaxies express the overall order of the universe, and are, in turn, fractally represented on a smaller scale by solar systems. Planets fractally represent the solar systems to which they belong. Many creatures living on earth are fractals of the planet that supports them, having skeletons, blood vessels, and moods in much the way the earth has continents, rivers, and weather.

Because tai chi is a fractal, every time we practice—indeed every time we perform even a single tai chi move—we bring the principles, shape, intelligence, and architecture of the whole system to bear on the goal of transforming our bodies and our lives. The very principle, and in some ways the most important lesson we learn from tai chi, is how to relax. When we are relaxed, we are less likely to be influenced by harmful forces that can poison the way we look at the world and our place in it. Free of such influences, we understand more clearly how to change the way we use our bodies and beneficially interact with our environment.

THE IRON LOLLIPOP

Conjure if you will the classic U.S. Marine Corps recruiting poster of yore, the one bearing the tagline "the few, the proud, the Marines." In this presentation of America's fighting finest, a row of men stands in dress uniform, rifles tucked in beside them, carrying themselves beautifully, with chests jutting and eyes forward. This straight posture is the archetypal one not only for a strong man, but for a graceful woman as well. The trouble is that while ballerinas manage their erect carriage by specifically training the muscles it requires, career soldiers—guards standing duty at an embassy post come to mind—may exaggerate their positions and rely on iron discipline to force their body up and forward. The result is that career military men often complain of inflexible torsos, low back pain, tender and restricted shoulders, hypertension, and more.

Holding too much stiffness in our body, we are like a lollipop that has turned from candy to iron. Top heavy and tense, we stress our heart, ruin our balance, and create musculoskeletal problems. Tai chi helps us to slide that iron lollipop down the stick, lowering our center of gravity, making us more stable and relaxed. The more relaxed we become, the more sensitive we are to environmental inputs ranging from pheromones, facial expressions, aromas, threatening body language, changes in temperature, nighttime sounds that are out of the ordinary, and a thousand other energetic harbingers of danger, opportunity, and more.

Without tension and with the lollipop low down, our body hangs as effortlessly as the skeleton in our high school science room. Imagining a string connecting the top of our head with heaven, we cultivate a nice, upright posture and forward gaze without effort. We focus on dropping and releasing every part of us right down to the molecular level, feeling the tension depart as we lower our center of gravity along our spine from the top of our head to the midpoint of our perineum.

SPECIFICS OF TAI CHI RELAXATION

Tai chi relaxation is a very particular phenomenon. It has nothing to do with kicking back on the family room couch with a beer in one hand and the television remote in the other. The Chinese term for tai chi relaxation is *fan song*, and it connotes linking mind and body in such a way that great internal and external awareness combine to allow us to unwind. Rather than lying on the ground as in a yoga corpse pose, tai chi relaxation takes place within a structured context. Tai chi players release tension in the muscles of the neck, back, and hips while building strength in the muscular core—particularly gluteal and abdominal groups—along with the thigh muscles (quadriceps).

Of course, we can no more commit to tai chi after a couple of classes than we can realistically commit to a lover after a few dates. Like any other relationship, the benefits must become apparent before the love can flow, before the sacrifices come willingly, before the difficulties can be surmounted. Faith in the art and the words of the teacher are useful—even necessary—at the very outset, but at some point we have to dig deep and remind ourselves that we started all this because we believe the tai chi life to be a good one.

The good news is that it really is.

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