



TAI CHI

THE PERFECT EXERCISE

*Finding Health, Happiness,
Balance, and Strength*

ARTHUR ROSENFELD

PRAISE FOR
*TAI CHI –
THE PERFECT EXERCISE*

“After my own decades of attempting to convey in ordinary English the deep and subtle insights of the Taoist traditions, I can appreciate the masterful contribution Arthur Rosenfeld had made with his *Tai Chi—The Perfect Exercise*. He brings sharp clarity to a subject too often shrouded in mystery and confusion.”

—GUY LEEKLE
author of *Tao Te Ching
A New Version for All Seekers*

“Whether you’re a man or a woman, beauty starts from within. Trust Arthur Rosenfeld’s easy-to-understand mind/body exercises to reduce your stress, increase your fitness, and transform you inside to out.”

—PETER THOMAS ROTH
CEO, Peter Thomas Roth Labs

“I have studied tai chi and qigong for thirty years, and found that all the most profound things I learned about these mind-body arts were not only represented in Arthur Rosenfeld’s book *Tai Chi—The Perfect Exercise*, but profoundly articulated in a way that will benefit any teacher of any style. This book also successfully conveys the deeper and wider lessons tai chi and qigong offer as agents of compassionate change in a world hungry for such change, deftly using high science, chaos mathematics, and sociological facts and images to show how cutting edge and modern these ancient mind-body arts are. Thank you Arthur for this gift to tai chi and qigong and to the world.”

—BILL DOUGLASS
Founder of World Tai Chi & Qigong Day, author of *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Tai Chi & Qigong*

“Arthur Rosenfeld is one of the most special and genuine voices in the arts today. Not persuaded by fame, attention or self-congratulatory actions; he walks a path that is unique, winding and full of discoveries, surprises and truth, not just for himself but for those lucky enough to align themselves with him.”

—DEL WESTON
Martial Artist, Producer, Writer, and Director

“Rosenfeld’s *Tai Chi* is as unique a contribution to the martial art as Bruce Lee’s *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* was to his. This muscular work weaves history and modernity with philosophy and combat to create a tapestry that transcends all disciplines. Tai chi will travel with you regardless of where you go and regardless of whether you take it.”

—CAMERON CONAWAY
author of *Caged: Memoirs of a Cage-Fighting Prisoner*

“Arthur Rosenfeld is rightfully one of the foremost tai chi masters in this country if not the world. This mastery has spiraled into his writing. Although a Zen teacher, I have practiced tai chi for many years. This book has illumined my practice and offers fresh teaching examples in the areas of breath and energy that I can share with my students. I’m highly appreciative of his contribution with this work.”

—MITCHELL DOSHIN CANTO
Sensei, The Southern Palm Zen Group

“Rosenfeld’s book will improve your health and your mind. Easy and fun to read, it is filled with uplifting stories, lots to make you think about the world and plenty of easy-to-follow practical fitness advice. A delight.”

—GRAEME MAXTON
bestselling author and Fellow of the Club of Rome

“This book is not a ‘how to’ but rather a ‘why you should’—an extended meditation on some of the central philosophical and physical tenets of tai chi as well as the physical and spiritual benefits the art can provide. Rosenfeld wisely uses his personal experience as a practitioner and his nuanced understanding of Taoist principles to explain how tai chi practice builds health and leads to an enhanced understanding of the human body. Each chapter explains significant aspects of tai chi physical principles, philosophy and ideas, finishing with exercises at three different levels that are designed to permit the reader to blend physical experience with conceptual insight....This a valuable and mature meditation on the virtually limitless depths of this art.”

—JOHN DONOHUE
author of the Connor Burke martial arts thrillers *Sensei*, *Deshi*, *Tengu* and *Ka*

“Through stories, reflections and history lessons, Arthur Rosenfeld walks with us on a path that makes us question much of what we assume about exercise, health, values, and being. Tai chi is his theme but his lessons are about living. You may find yourself looking for a local tai chi master when you are done, but you may also find yourself examining your life and your routines, inspired and empowered to make deep and healthy changes.”

—STEPHEN ROSENFELD, M.D., M.B.A.
Institutional Review Board Chair

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THE PERFECT EXERCISE



ALSO BY ARTHUR ROSENFELD

The Truth About Chronic Pain

TAI CHI

THE PERFECT EXERCISE

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Happiness,
Balance,
AND
Strength

ARTHUR ROSENFELD

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*For all my teachers and all my students past, present, and future.
Without you, I could not live the life I do and share the art I love.*

“Though words cannot reveal the Source, They do give meaning to the world we know.”

TAO TE CHING (v. 1)
(Guy Leekley, Translator)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Master Max Yan deserves my biggest thanks for deepening my understanding of all the Taoist art. His tai chi is simply without equal. Thanks also to Grandmaster Chen Quanzhong for setting the tone for my training. Over my protests, my illustrious agent, Bob Mecoy, who is always right, insisted I write this book. I'm glad I listened to him. My wonderful wife, Janelle, and my amazing son, Tasma, made the writing possible with their infinite forbearance—this work represents a shameful number of hours away from family activities. The flow and content here is thanks mostly to my editor, Rene Sedliar, without whom my ramblings would have been esoteric to the point of incomprehensibility. The look of the book owes much to David Fryburg's instinctive eye and magnificent photographs. Truly it would not be the visual treat it is without his contribution. Thanks to both my senior student Jennifer Beimel, and my kung fu brother, Todd Plager, for their persistent proofing and suggestions. Thanks to Robin Ha for clean and clear illustrations, to Marco Pavia for helping it all come together, and to Jonathan Sainsbury and others at Da Capo who provided such a fine cover and balanced interior design.



Grandmaster Chen Quanzhong and Master Max Yan

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 contrast 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.

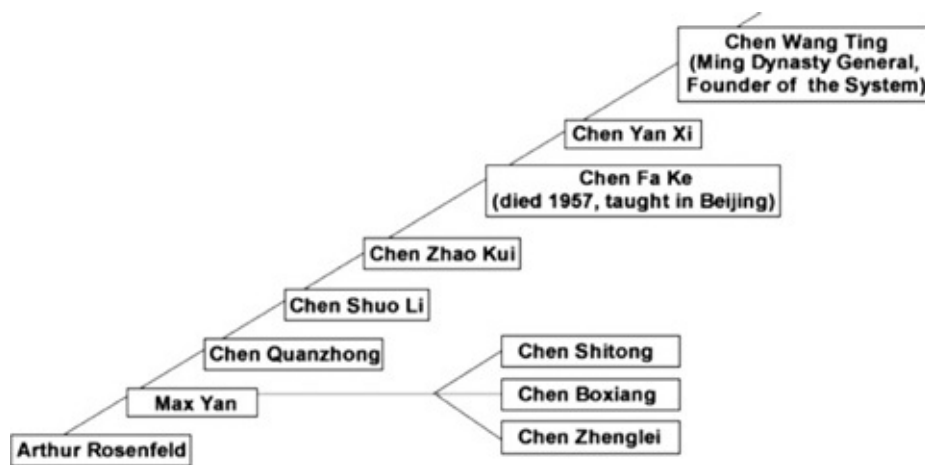
Frequent intervals of illness were punctuated by intervals of cautious activity, but because I was overweight and chronically out of shape, gangs mugged me every few weeks on the streets of a far rougher New York City than the one that exists today. I had grown up keenly aware of unfairness and injustice, 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 flexibility 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 me

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.

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 transformation 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 deeper 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 provides exercises—termed “Explorations”—to deepen the understanding of the material offered. The 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. The 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 set 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 the

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 hit a ride on the running river of life is to be maximally effective with minimal effort. The Lao Tzu and his 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 competitive 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 or 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 Mongolian and Muslim fighting arts from what is now the Chinese province of Xinjiang are included in the 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 in 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” 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 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. This 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 known 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 bone 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 investigation 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 trapping, 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

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