



Inner Exercise

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Today, as more people of all ages focus on maintaining optimum health and beauty, an increasing awareness of the many forms of exercise brings new discoveries daily. While some people are conscious of maintaining safe and effective fitness regimes, others tend to needlessly expend their energy without gaining their desired results by choosing inappropriate forms of exercise. Many do not realize the choice of internal exercise and its tremendous benefits.

In the West, the focus of exercise has always been on the external body. The prevailing assumption stands that if we look good, then we are healthy. To look good, we must be slim, develop a wash-board-like abdomen, sport well defined pectoral muscles and a tight rear end. A workout at the gym consists of a series of separate exercise routines that isolate and target different muscle groups which create that hard body look. By exercising these different areas of the body we believe that we burn calories, thereby burning off unwanted fat. We believe that by developing the body according to these principles, we not only look beautiful and young, but are also sexually attractive and healthy.

It is important, however, to examine our basic assumption that good health can be equated with our concepts of external physical beauty and strength. If we have a slim body, with the features described above, are we really healthy? At the gym, we tend to exercise the muscles, but what about the internal organs or the mind, or spirit?

If we translate the condition of the external body to mean overall health it follows that the instance of surviving without a limb is as possible as living without a heart or liver. In other words, are strong muscles or well functioning vital organs more crucial to our health? Can we have an attractive, healthy body without having a healthy mind and spirit? Are we guilty of being too reductionalistic in exercising one aspect of the body while ignoring the rest in our quest for good health?

One form of exercise which challenges the assumption that external exercise will lead to good health is one which has been practiced in China every day, for many years, and by millions of people. Recently, Westerners have discovered this ancient form of exercise and its popularity is spreading worldwide. It is a form of internal exercise based not on the development of the external physique, but on the development of the internal energy (Qi)* and the health of the internal organs. This exercise is T'ai Chi Ch'uan, sometimes called Shadow Boxing.

T'ai Chi is sometimes unfathomable to Westerners because it combines philosophical, spiritual and mental exercise with physical fitness. T'ai Chi is both an energetic workout and a powerful martial art. By practicing the solo movements of the T'ai Chi form, one activates stagnant, moves obstructed, and builds up deficient Qi energy. This process of moving, activating and tonifying Qi energy to create a balanced energy flow in the body allows the body to heal itself. It is these same principles of energy flow and balance which constitute the fundamental principles of Chinese medicine and Acupuncture. Simply stated, by practicing T'ai Chi one receives the benefits of an acupuncture treatment. Moreover, because T'ai Chi is an internal martial art, through its practice one learns to sense and understand one's own energy and that of others. This awareness of energy, when cultivated, becomes a powerful self defense mechanism which enables the practitioner to ward off attacks of all kinds.

As an inner exercise, T'ai Chi differs from western forms of exercise and sport in that it focuses on the internal aspect of the body: the development of the Qi energy, rather than the development of the musculature or external frame. Health is defined in Chinese Medicine as the balance of the Qi energy of the internal organs. If the Qi is not balanced, it becomes either excessive or deficient. Imbalances occur as a result of poor diet, excessive sexual activity or by obstructions or stagnations of the Qi either in an organ or in its circulatory pathway. When the stagnation or obstruction remains, the Qi becomes perverse or pathological. It sets off a chain reaction of disharmony within the whole body, which eventually leads to a physical breakdown which is then recognized as a disease. To restore health means to restore the balance and harmony of the Qi energy as it circulates throughout the body at its different levels. Health is also considered to be found in the harmony and proper coordination between the physical, energetic, mental and spiritual levels of the body.

As a practitioner of Chinese Medicine I am in a position to assess and gain a perspective on what is and what is not healthy. I have seen many young patients with strong external physiques who most people would assume to be healthy. They do regular workouts at the gym, attend exercise classes, run and sweat, but often they are internally ill. They suffer from weak digestion, deficient kidneys, poor bowel movements or have no sex drive. Clearly, their physique is no indicator of the health of their internal organs. Unfortunately, external exercises only affect the external and rarely penetrate into the internal aspects of the body.

The goal of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, or any internal exercise, is to reach these inner levels and stimulate the Qi if it is deficient, or disperse the Qi if it is excessive, so that equilibrium is maintained. To reach the Qi in the inner levels of the body, the practitioner must reach inwardly through and beyond the external physical body. To do this he or she must learn to relax to let all obstructions disappear.

All the movements practiced in T'ai Chi Ch'uan must come from the center so that the movements of the four limbs are completely relaxed and follow the rotation

of the hips. There must not be any muscular activation of the external body or the internal stimulation of the Qi is broken. Even while standing, the practitioner must try to relax the legs. The deeper the relaxation, the deeper contact there is with the Qi and the inner layers of the body. The headtop must be suspended so that the neck is relaxed and the Qi can reach the crown. The spine must be straight so that the chest may be sunken, the abdominal muscles relaxed, and the lower back released. When the abdomen is relaxed and the chest is sunken, the diaphragm takes on the task of breathing. By relaxing the torso and breathing abdominally, the body has a lower center of gravity. This means it becomes more stable. The rhythmic movements of the diaphragm gently massage the internal organs with each breath.

The weight of the body falls on the thighs (the quadriceps muscles). As the legs relax and the weight falls on the thighs, the kidneys become stimulated and tonified with each weight shift and rotation of the hips. In Chinese Medicine the kidneys are the storehouse of the immune system, the source of the sexual energy, and the origins of the prenatal Qi upon which his or her longevity depends. Therefore much of T'ai Chi Ch'uan involves the development of the kidney Qi through the emphasis on the legs and the spine. When one practices the solo movements an inner heat is aroused and spreads throughout the body. This warmth begins to heat up the spine and all the bones. As the spine and bones begin to cool after working out, a condensation forms which then begins to permeate the bones. After many years of this permeating process the bones become more dense and powerful. This tends to reverse the vulnerability of osteoporosis which comes as we get older. The Qi also nurtures the sinews of the body which allow us to maintain our youthful stature in instead of shrinking as we get older.

All T'ai Chi movements consist of various combinations of shifting the weight from one leg to the other, rotating the hips, stepping outward and letting the arms follow in different patterns in a slow rhythmic motion that coordinates with the breath. The mind is in a state of emptiness as in meditation, so it directs the Qi to circulate throughout the body during the various postures of the exercise. The Qi acts as a medium between the direction of the mind and the execution of the movements. Because the muscles are relaxed while in motion, the Qi which circulates throughout the body is not used up or metabolized in supporting muscular action. It is therefore full as it returns to the internal organs to nurture and support their functions.

As a health practice, T'ai Chi Ch'uan is unique in its healing properties and drastically contrasts Western concepts of exercise and sport. In the West, we measure exercise on the aerobic effect on the body. It is believed that we need a certain amount of stress to work the body to attain optimum health. We must work the muscles of body so that the heart and lungs are forced to function at an accelerated pace, thus causing them to work better. This model is analogous to racing the engine of a car that hasn't been running for a while, to blow out the accumulated cobwebs. However, this mechanical view of the body does not address the energetic or other subtler levels. When the body is engaged in this kind of vigorous exercise, there is an increase in the rate of respiration, the heart rate, a constriction of the blood vessels, a rise in the blood pressure, and a closing down of the visceral and digestive functions. This explains why exercising just after eating causes nausea and stomach pains.

Generating an accelerated physical condition clearly poses a problem for the person with a heart condition, a weakened state, or with a life-threatening illness. In contrast, in the practice of internal exercises, the opposite conditions prevail. There is a decrease in the rate of respiration, a lowering of the heart rate, a decrease in the blood pressure, dilation of the blood vessels, and digestion is encouraged. Similar to a state of rest or deep relaxation, exercising internally creates a condition where the body regenerates itself. There is no mechanical stress placed on the functioning of the internal organs. The body opens up, circulation of Qi and blood improves, and the mind relaxes. An environment of regeneration and renewal prevails, and healing occurs. A well known doctor from Harvard Medical School, Dr. Andrew Weil, who has studied the process of healing, said that, "a successful treatment occurs when it eliminates the obstacles in the body that prevent it from healing itself."

Essential to the practice of T'ai Chi Ch'uan is the development of an attitude that contrasts Western concepts of achievement. This attitude is one of softness, gentleness, yielding, and acceptance. This is quite different from the familiar "values" of competition, power and success.

There are many things in life that are beyond human control. The use of power and competition in trying to achieve influence and control over these situations only brings undue stress, disappointment and ultimately, bad health. In the practice of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, (and more specifically, through the exercise of push hands), we learn to physically yield to force as it is exerted on our body. We learn to turn a disadvantageous position into an advantageous one. The practice of yielding means that we do not resist or use force to overcome any situation. We learn that by being the softest, we become the most powerful. It is out of this softness one becomes the strongest.

This kind of strength, different than muscular strength, is an internal strength that is cultivated from the Qi. The more you relax the muscles, the greater the circulation of Qi there is, and the more powerful you become. When you give up the use of the muscles, a greater force manifests within the body. This inner chin force which is derived from Qi cannot exist in the body at the same time as muscular strength gained by exercising externally. This force is the combination of the Qi energy united with the mind. External muscular strength blocks this other energy. This model applies not only to our daily lives but also in any martial situations. After many years of cultivating this way of thinking and moving, our bodies achieve a natural response of lightness, softness, groundedness, emptiness, and power. These are qualities that are part of the ancient Chinese philosophy of Taoism. When one practices T'ai Chi Ch'uan, one is physically reenacting these ancient principles. A famous T'ai Chi Master, Cheng Man-ch'ing, once admonished his students to "invest in loss" as a way of cultivating these principles. What he meant was by practicing losing, you will know how to win. He also meant that by giving up the use of muscular strength you will be able to cultivate the internal energy of the body and thereby attain optimum health and wisdom.

*Qi is the internal energy or life force of the body and should not be confused with the Chinese character Chi in T'ai Chi Ch'uan which is pronounced Ji.