Free and Easy Wandering: A Western Daoist Manifesto

The Tai Chi Sword and Spiritual Swordsmanship

Stress, Illness & the Daoist Antidote

Introduction to Classical Feng Shui
Dr. Bruce Frantzis is a Taoist Lineage Master with over 40 years of experience in Eastern healing systems. He is the first known Westerner to hold authentic lineages in tai chi, bagua, hsing-i, qigong and Taoist meditation. Frantzis has taught Taoist energy arts to more than 15,000 students. Frantzis trained for over a decade in China and also has extensive experience in Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, yoga, Kundalini, energy healing therapies and Taoist Fire and Water traditions.

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Bruce Frantzis, Ph.D., is a Taoist Lineage Master with over 40 years of experience in Eastern healing systems. He is the first known Westerner to hold authentic lineages in tai chi, bagua, hsing-i, qigong and Taoist meditation. He has taught Taoist energy arts to more than 15,000 students. Frantzis trained for over a decade in China and also has extensive experience in Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, yoga, Kundalini, energy healing therapies and Taoist Fire and Water traditions.
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What Is Daoism?

“The Dao that can be described is not the eternal Dao.”
So begins the Daodejing of Laozi written some 2,500 years ago. How then, to describe the indescribable? How to fit into words that which is beyond words? The Dao can only be pointed to, or referred to, say the ancient sages. It cannot be held, only experienced. It cannot be touched, only felt. It cannot be seen, only glimpsed with the inner eye.

Dao, then, is the Way, as in direction, as in manner, source, destination, purpose and process. In discovering and exploring Dao the process and the destination are one and the same. Laozi describes a Daoist as the one who sees simplicity in the complicated and achieves greatness in little things. He or she is dedicated to discovering the dance of the cosmos in the passing of each season as well as the passing of each precious moment in our lives.

Daoism was already long established when Laozi wrote the Daodejing. It originated in the ancient shamanic roots of Chinese civilization. Many of the practices and attitudes toward life were already established before Laozi’s time. For many centuries Daoism was an informal way of life, a way followed by peasant, farmer, gentleman philosopher and artist. It was a way of deep reflection and of learning from Nature, considered the highest teacher. Followers of the Way studied the stars in the heavens and the energy that lies deep within the earth. They meditated upon the energy flow within their own bodies and mapped out the roads and paths it traveled upon.

It is a belief in life, a belief in the glorious procession of each unfolding moment. It is a deeply spiritual life, involving introspection, balance, emotional and spiritual independence and responsibility and a deep awareness and connection to the earth and all other life forms. It requires an understanding of how energy works in the body and how to treat illness in a safe, non-invasive way while teaching practical ways of maintaining health and avoiding disease and discomfort. Daoist meditation techniques help the practitioner enter deeper or more expansive levels of wakefulness and inner strength. But most of all, it is a simple, natural, practical way of being in our bodies and our psyches and sharing that way of being with all other life forms we come into contact with.

Today in China and in the West, Daoism is often divided into two forms, dao jio and dao jia. Or religious Daoism and philosophical Daoism. Many scholars argue that there are not two distinct forms of Daoism and in many ways they are right. There is really a great intermingling of the religious form of Daoism and its various sects and the philosophical Daoism of Laozi and Zhuangzi. But many people who follow the Dao do not consider themselves religious people and do not go to temples and are not ordained as priests. Rather these two forms exist both side by side and within each other.

As it says in the opening lines of the Daodejing: “Dao or Way that can be spoken of or described in words is not eternal Dao.” It is up to each of us to find the way to the Way in our own way. What we try to do with The Empty Vessel is offer articles and information to help you, our dear readers, to do that.
Join us in September when we travel to the sacred mountains of Daoism – Wudang Shan – home of Daoist taiji, qigong and martial arts. We will spend days hiking and visiting some of the many Daoist temples there, attend classes with a local master, drink tea in the temple teahouse and practice Wuji Qigong, a 600 hundred year old qigong form, created by the famous Wudang Daoist master Zhang San Feng. We will also be visiting Maoshan, an ancient Daoist mountain. We will visit the Qianyuan Guan, a Daoist nunnery, famed for the purity of their practice and the wonderful sounds of their orchestra. The abbess, Yin Xinhui, is one of the few heads of temples who does not take government money for rebuilding (which means fewer tourists) but works to maintain her temple through ceremonies (which, hopefully we will get to witness while we are there.)

We will also be spending time in Hangzhou, one of the most beautiful cities in China. Hangzhou, circling around West Lake, has long been revered for its beauty and culture. While there we visit a tea plantation (where the famous Dragon Well tea is grown), as well as the museum of Chinese Medicine and take in an awe inspiring lake show by Zhang Yimou, the well known Chinense film director, called West Lake Impressions (check it out on youtube).

The last few days will be spent in Beijing, where we will visit the White Cloud Temple, the Great Wall and the fabulous tea market as well as attend some amazing acrobat shows. All along the way we will eat amazing food, meet qigong masters, artists, musicians, tea masters, and one cave dwelling hermit.

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<th>17-day China Tour</th>
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“Thank you so much for planning such a perfect trip for us.”

“Thanks again for organizing such an amazing trip. I had a fantastic time and will never forget it.”
Along the Way

Spring is finally springing up here in Oregon, though we did have a freakish snow storm this month, (April) that dumped only six inches of snow on us but caused a lot of devastation. The problem was that it was only just cold enough for snow and the snow fall was very wet and heavy, knocking down countless power lines and many trees. We lost two enormous limbs from our beloved grandma willow tree in the back yard. Very sad. Not only that but our bamboo was pushed so far over at the back of the house that it knocked our electric meter sideways.

We were out of power for two days but fortunately, we have a wood stove in the living room, which kept us warm and I have a camping stove for making tea so it was not too bad. The hardest thing was reading, which I was able to do by putting on a camping light that goes onto your head. It worked great for getting light on the page. I plan on bringing one when I go to China this September, as the bulbs used in China never seem more powerful than 25 watts.

We are planning a very special trip to China this year, with a stop at Maoshan, an ancient Daoist mountain where all the temples were destroyed by the Japanese during the war, as it lies very close to Nanjing. On one side of the mountain the temple has been rebuilt, complete with a hundred foot high statue of Laozi, with government money. I imagine it will be a sort of Daoist Disneyland feeling but I’m sure will be fun.

On the other side of the mountain, however, the temple has been rebuilt by the abbess, Yin Xinhui, with no money from the government. She and the nuns who live there with her are trying to maintain the traditional Daoist life, with emphasis on practice and not trying to attract tourists. We will be spending a few days there with her and look forward to reporting back to you in our Winter issue.

Of course we will be spending time in the Wudang mountains as well, including a visit to our old friend Jiaye, who lives in a cave up above the Purple Heavenly Temple.

We have also added quite a bit of new material on our new website at www.CommunityAwake.com, including some video from our trip to Wudang last year.

On another note, I recently have become re-introduced to a wonderful poet named Nanao Sakaki, who was a very famous Beat poet from Japan who wandered all over that country, writing poetry, starting communes and such. He died just a few years ago. I would like to leave you all with one of my favorite poems of his. It is short and very to the point.

If you have time to chatter
Read Books
If you have time to read
Walk into mountain, desert and ocean
If you have time to walk
Sing songs and dance
If you have time to dance
Sit quietly, you Happy Lucky Idiot

Solala Towler, editor

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or go to our website at www.abodetao.com
News from The Abode of the Eternal Dao

The Empty Vessel is now available as an Apple app for downloading to Ipads and Iphones. We are also available on the Barnes & Noble Nook devices and the Kindle Fire. Downloadable full color versions of the journal are also available on our website at www.CommunityAwake.com.

Dowload past articles, interviews, music, video and more (much of it for free).

Solala will be a keynote speaker at the National Qigong Association annual conference in Vancouver, WA on July 27-29.

For more information on this exciting event go to www.nqa.org.

Join us in June for the Wuji Qigong On-Line Course with Solala Towler at Discover the Fire (www.discoverthefire.com)

Wuji (Primordial) Qigong is a 600-year-old Daoist cosmological form, created by the famous Wudang master Zhang San Feng.

Low cost weekly video classes, supplemented with written material.
To learn more go to www.discoverthefire.com.

Discover the Fire is a quickly growing online community of students from all over the world who are interested in mind-body meditative arts such as Tai Chi, Qigong, and various forms of meditation. Currently a new lesson is offered each month with a focus on learning a specific form or principle to enhance understanding and foster growth.

Think of Discover the Fire as an online university that caters specifically to students of the ancient healing arts. Lessons are presented through video, audio, written guidelines, forum discussions with the teacher and fellow students, and live interactions such as web conferences, instant messaging, and streaming group meditation sessions.

A basic monthly membership to www.discoverthefire.com is available for under $10 per month. Join now and discover a new insight each and every month!
belong to a number of Daoist forums on LinkedIn and an amazing amount of time is spent arguing who is a “Daoist” and who is not. Buddhism has many different sects and flavors — including disparate forms such as Zen, Chan, Pure Land, Mahayana, Theravada, Hinayana, and Tibetan — yet those who follow any of them consider themselves Buddhists. But among followers of Daoism, there is always a lot of contention as to who is a real Daoist and who is not.

One of my teachers, Hua-Ching Ni, says,

To learn the Way is more important than talking about what is the Way. (1)

I am sure that Laozi and certainly Zhuangzi, would agree.

I have spoken before about the two forms or streams of Daoism. Modern scholars in China, and increasingly in the West (though, of course, there is a lot of arguing about this as well), call these two streams daojia and dao jiao.

Daojia or “philosophical Daoism,” is the title used since the Han dynasty for the school founded by Laozi and Zhuangzi. (2)

Eva Wong, another contemporary Daoist master, puts it this way.

There are basically two main traditions in the transmission of Taoist teachings. One is called the lay transmission, which is essentially a non-monastic or non-sectarian type of teaching. There’s also what is called the lineage transmission. The monastic transmission is one part of the lineage. (3)

Dao jiao is considered the form of Daoism that Laozi, Zhuangzi and Liehzi were speaking about in the earli-
est writings of what today is called Daoism. Of course, there was no such thing as “Daoism” when these ancient teachers were writing. The Daoist religion did not come until almost 700 years later. This form is also sometimes called HuangLao Daoism, after the great cultural hero The Yellow Emperor and of course, Laozi.

Contrary to what some people in the West think, Laozi did not invent Daoism. As I just mentioned, there was nothing called Daoism in his time. And whether or not there was a historical figure called Laozi or Lao Tan, doesn’t really change the importance of the text bearing his name. The teachings and practices contained in the Daode Jing are just as important and powerful, whoever wrote it.

Many of the beliefs and practices of Daoism were already long established when Laozi wrote the Daode Jing. They originated in the ancient shamanic roots (wu) of Chinese civilization. For centuries what today we call Daoism was an informal way of life, a way followed by peasant, farmer, gentleman philosopher and artist. It was a way of deep reflection and of learning from nature, considered the highest teacher. Followers of the Way studied the stars in the heavens and the energy that lies deep within the earth. They meditated upon the energy flow within their own bodies and mapped out the roads and paths it traveled upon.

You will find very little about reincarnation, karma, or immortals in these books. Most of these ideas were added on much later, when Daoism was heavily influenced by Buddhism.

But the original ideas such as wu wei (not forcing), the watercourse way (going with the flow), meditation (described numerous times in the Daode Jing), not exalting the high over the low, taking it one step at a time (a famous passage from Laozi), being flexible (like the young plant), not building up riches, letting go of intellectual knowledge, the soft overcoming the hard, keeping quiet about one’s attainments, being humble and concealing one’s light, leading from behind, not struggling, not arguing, not being afraid of death — these are all ideas contained in the early writings of Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Liehzi.

Dao jio, on the other hand, is often thought of as Daoist religious practice. This was started quite a bit later than Laozi’s work. It wasn’t until 142 CE that this form of Daoism came into being, with a revelation by Zhang Daoling. He had a vision of Laozi himself coming to him while he meditated high in the mountains outside of Chengdu. He named his form of Daoist religion Tian Shi or Heavenly Masters.

I have visited there in the mountain range called Qingcheng Shan. When I stood in Zhang Daoling’s meditation cave I felt the incredibly strong energy of this man who came there so long ago and meditated with such fierceness in this place until he drew to him the spirit of the ancient sage.

Thereafter followed a whole school of monasticism, something new to Daoism in China at that time. A liturgy and priestly function was created, which included many
practices such as divination, exorcism and large community rituals of absolution, petitions to the spirit world or even weather magic.

Much of the organization and liturgy were heavily influenced by Buddhism, which became quite popular in the second century CE. A community of celibate, vegetarian monks and nuns was established, also not something the original Daoist thinkers like Laozi and Zhuangzi had ever written about.

From Laozi’s famous statement that the true Dao cannot be put into words, there evolved a Daoist canon comprising over 5400 scrolls! The first religious Daoists emphasized mass rituals of public confessions of moral transgressions over medical practices.

In this system, as Michel Stickman, tell us, in his fascinating study of Chinese Magical Medicine,

The presence of disease was thought to indicate some moral failing. Conversely, the faithful were kept in order by the threat of illness, which would attack them should they ever transgress the rules. Physical health was consequently a function of moral or spiritual health, and the priest was necessarily the arbiter. Should a believer fall ill, he had first to be isolated from the community in a “chamber of quietness” to ponder and repent his moral failings. Subsequently, a priest would write out a formal document, the affiliated person’s confession of guilt. (4)

The use of sacred scriptures was emphasized over materia medica. Sometimes just the chanting of the names of the medical formulas was emphasized over ingesting them. In this system the patient would isolate themselves and chant the scripture three thousand times in order to be healed. Eventually it was believed that just owning Daoist scriptures themselves provided protection from illness or demon attacks.

There were also large gatherings where people offered public confessions of their moral transgressions. In these great rituals the priests would petition the spirits to cleanse people of their “sins.”

There was also a great belief in demon possession, ghost and even corpse attacks.

Ge Hong, the famous Daoist alchemist of the fourth century listed various kinds of demons and corpse attacks that would also result in serious health problems. He mentions “corpse demons”, “reclusive corpses”, “wind corpses” and “sinking corpses” – all causing a host of serious illnesses. (4)

I mention these just to give my readers a taste of the various beliefs associated with ancient Daoist religious movements. Many people in the West have never heard of these kinds of things. But it is common even today in China for Daoist priests to conduct exorcisms of people afflicted with a variety of demons or evil spirits.

Many Westerners, impressed by the culture and history of the East, are drawn to its thought, art, music, food, medicine and philosophies. But Daoism is not just some ancient, foreign, mystical path. Its practices work on many levels — physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual. It can be applied to political action, environ-mental concerns, economic interests, emotional clearing, health problems, business enterprises, psychological balance, sexuality and spiritual fulfillment. It works well for highly individualized Westerners and can be approached on any level, from the rank beginner to the evolved aspirant.

Of course, what we are talking about here is something I call Western Daoism. Just as Buddhism came to the West and was influenced and reshaped into something often quite different than the way it is practiced in Japan or Tibet, so too will Daoism be shaped into something much different than what is practiced in the temples of China and Taiwan. (A great book about Buddhism coming to the West and how it was reshaped and reformed is How the Swans Came to the Lake by Rick Fields.)

Daoism is still too new in the West for us to imagine what shape it will take but, just as most followers of Buddhism in the West are lay practitioners, I feel that will also be the case with Daoism. Few Westerners are interested in becoming ordained Daoist priests or nuns and few Western students of Daoism are interested in the formal religious Daoism one finds in the temples of China. I do not mean to denigrate religious Daoism here as I have much respect for its long and rich tradition and the role it has in both history and modern culture in China.

I have had certain ordained Western Daoists and scholars tell me that no one can use the term Daoist unless they are an ordained priest. But this is like Christians not being able to call themselves as such unless they are a priest or a nun. Buddhism is the same way. There has always been a lay version of these spiritual traditions. Perhaps a new term needs to be discovered for us Western Daoists. Sometimes I like to use the term “Dao People (dao ren)”. This takes the “ism” part out of the equation. As my friend Chungliang Al Huang says,

With all respect for the “ism,” we need to label, we need to call it Taoism to give it a framework. But we know that Tao defies “ism.” If Tao gets stuck with “ism” then it would be separated from the rest of life. . . . My favorite translation of the first line of the Tao Te Ching is: “The Tao that can be “ismed” is not the Tao. The Tao student of life who becomes an “ist” misses a big chunk of Tao and becomes a small “t” Taoist. The Tao cannot be “ismed”. If we only see the term Taoism as a concept, it can be very confining. We need to open it up, and allow ourselves to grow in and fulfill Tao. (4)

Laozi says this about seekers of the Way (Dao):

My words are easy to understand and easy to put into practice.
Yet, under heaven, no one seems to understand them or can put them into practice.
My words have an ancient source and my deeds have their masters.
Yet people do not understand me and so do not understand my teaching.
Because those who do understand me are few

The Empty Vessel
those who follow me are precious.  
This is why the sage dresses himself in coarse clothing while hiding precious jade in his heart.  
(70)

High in the mountains of China at the ancient Taiping Temple on Lao Shan my friends and I met with the temple abbot. As we drank cup after cup of the flavorsome green tea that is grown on the mountain, we listened as Abbot Liu told us that, “Daoism is all based on the study of nature. Study the ways of nature and you can’t go wrong.

“We have common points, you and I,” he continued, “American people love nature. American people love peace. They pursue good health. They have many common points with Daoism, so it is very natural for them to study Daoism. American people also have a lot of scientific achievement. I think that if they combine Daoist ideas and scientific achievement they will be very strong. Study Daoism bit by bit, one thing or aspect at a time. I know that American people love freedom, freedom of the individual. Develop Daoism in America according to the reality of America.”

High in the Wudang mountains I have visited with a Daoist hermit who has lived in a cave for twenty years. And when I say cave I do not mean a cave that has been turned into a house, but a real cave. He goes by the name Jiaye, old grandfather. You can see some wonderful footage of him on YouTube under “bee daoist.”

Once, when I asked him what his cultivation practice was (imaging all sorts of esoteric cave practices) he said meditation. Then he said the other thing was, “It’s very important to cultivate a loving heart.” His wonderful toothless grin always captivates the people on my tour.

There has always been a strain of Daoism that had little to do with priestly affairs. This form of Daoism was practiced by artists, poets, musicians, herbal doctors and the educated class of the literati. These men were often retired political figures who spent their declining years studying the energetic/spiritual practices called yang sheng or cultivating life practices, today sometimes called nei dan, or internal alchemy.

One of the most famous poets of Chinese history, Li Bo, beloved by the Chinese people, was not only a lay Daoist (many of his poems have Daoist themes) but also a drunken poet knight errant who, in his youth, used his sword to protect the helpless. Many of his poems also speak about a great deal of wine drinking. This can be taken two ways, one that he was a great wine drinker or that the wine he speaks so much about is a metaphor for tapping into the sacred (as do the great poems by the Muslim ecstatic poets Rumi and Kabir), or into the wild free open spaces beyond the reach of “society” and “culture.”

There are also the famous Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove. This was a group of seven men who wrote Daoist poems as well as poems criticizing the court and the administration. They also wrote manuals on Daoist mysticism and alchemy. Because they were not interested in the political intrigues of the court they gathered in a bamboo grove where they drank wine and recited poetry, which stressed their enjoyment of wine, personal freedom, spontaneity and love of nature. One of them is even said to have had his personal servant follow behind him with a spade. The idea was if he suddenly dropped dead there in the bamboo grove he could be buried where he fell.

I mention these figures to give you some idea of just what kind of lay Daoists there have been. Historically, it was the freethinking Daoists that were looked down upon by the ruling class. (There were a few times in Chinese history when the ruling elite supported Daoism, such as the Tang dynasty, when the emperor considered himself a direct descendent of Laozi). These people did not toe the Gongfuzi (Confucian) line that was so beloved by the rulers and so were not trusted by the powers that be. They often ended up in the mountains, where they could live close to heaven and nature and far away from the emperor. The word for sage in Chinese is xianren, which combines the characters for person and mountain. It was in the mountains that they could find a combination of good qi (vital energy) as well as good de (spiritual vitality) that they needed for their cultivation practices. It also helped that they were far away from the tawdry affairs of a society that did not always appreciate those who tread on their own path.

Many modern people’s first introduction to Daoism is through Laozi’s work, the Daode Jing. Today it is the widely translated book in the world, after the Bible — a best seller for over 2500 years! As Laozi tells us in the very first lines of the Daode Jing, to try and put into words all that is Dao is impossible. For words cannot hold what Dao truly is. They can only give us glimpses, as if we were seeing it deep within a bank of clouds or a thick mist. Words can only approximate what the experience of Dao is.

Yet his gift to the world was to use these few words in such a way as to give us guidance and food for thought as well as practices to live a full, thoughtful and graceful life. Though often thought of as a book of philosophy, there are actually many instructions for various meditation and energy (qi) practices in its pages.

The path of Dao is one of complete freedom. It is a path that takes us outside the world of rules and regulations. It is a path that frees us from too much thinking, too much trying to fit into the ideas the world has about what constitutes a “spiritual person.” It is a path that grounds us in our bodies and roots us in the earth while opening us to the healing energy of the heavens. It is a path of joy and creativity and deep belly laughter. It is a path that reminds us, constantly and deeply, of our place in the world and of our connection to all other life forms on this earth — “the ten thousand beings.”

Maoshing Ni says,

The Tao is also very flexible, very adaptive. So it doesn’t matter if it’s even called the Tao ultimately. The most important thing is that people begin to see, understand and practice its principles so that their lives can become much more positive,
much more creative, and much more gratifying. (6)

This path of Dao then, is one which takes into consideration all aspects of the spiritual path — physical, emotional, energetic, sexual, social, psychological — everything. It is not enough to just work with only one or two aspects of the Way. It is crucial to work on them all. A Dao Person is a well-balanced and well-rounded person. The path of a Dao Person is one of being deeply engaged with life and the world of the “ten thousand beings.”

It is not a path of renunciation and escape from life. That being said, there are times when it is good and even beneficial to take time away from the world of “red dust” and go on retreat. This can happen by spending time in the mountains, the seashore or even in one’s own home. Take the phone off the hook, unplug the computer, don’t speak to anyone, spend time in meditation and contemplation, eat lightly, drink lots of tea.

Of course this is not to denigrate religious Daoism, which has played and continues to play, an important role in the cultural life of Chinese Daoists. Daoist temples are being rebuilt or built totally new all over China today as the Chinese people renew their interest in spiritual matters. The last time I was at the Ba Xian Gong temple in Xian the place was packed with so many people burning incense in the giant incense burners outside that actual flames were shooting out of them! Of course, many of the worshipers there were praying for better jobs, better housing, a girl/boyfriend, or relief from some health problem.

Yet it has always been this way. Even in the temples there are only a handful of monks or nuns who are actually doing deep cultivation practices. Many of them, especially in the modern Communist age, are actually businessmen, running the temple and all of its financial aspects. Many more are there for a job, three meals and a bed. Throughout history there have always only been a handful of Daoists who “attained Dao.”

But, at the same time, the rituals that the Daoists do in the temples are an important part of the cultural life of its adherents — whether it is at funerals, exorcisms or times of great stress such as droughts — they have brought people together in a way that only true ritual does.

What I speak of here is what I am calling Western Daoism, which may be a totally new concept than historical Daoism in China. It is interesting to watch the transformation of Zen Buddhism in the West from a temple-centered practice in Japan to neighborhood zendos and people sitting in their own home. The first teachers of Zen who arrived in Japan, especially the ones that came in the tumultuous 60’s, found themselves teaching and practicing in much new ways than they had been trained in Japan.

I feel that so too, will Daoism take on new forms, new flavors, and new approaches to ancient thought and practice. Some scholars and religious Daoists may complain that this is not “real Daoism.” This is not important. Which is more valuable for people who are actually in the trenches of Daoist cultivation practices — making sure they adhere to historical ideas of Daoism or discovering ways to make these practices their own, in their own life,
in their own country, in their own time?

I think this is an exciting time, this time of exploration and discovery of what Daoism will become in the West. Pay no attention to the scholars who argue that unless you are an ordained priest, you cannot call yourself a Daoist. (Actually, there is no need to label yourself as anything other than a “student of the Way.”) Free yourself from the tyranny of the ideas and opinions of others and discover your own way upon the Way. Leave the world of “isms” and boldly strike out into the world of experience and self-cultivation.

Deng Ming Dao, author of the popular Wandering Taoist trilogy once told me,

There is a part of Taoism and a part of China that is very precious and very beautiful once you get that for yourself. That also is part of it. Sure we want to talk about how Taoism works in the West, how it’s good for health and spirituality. One thing that people don’t talk about very much is that there is something about it that is so precious, so special, something to really love and treasure. Once that opens for you there’s no doubt in your mind about it. There’s no end to the road you walk when you are on your path. That’s something that I hope people will remember, that the path of Tao is a path that is very special and it is a living path that will provide for you forever once you get on it. (7)

Daoist thought and practice has had a profound influence on Chinese culture — Chinese medicine, feng shui, astrology, painting, calligraphy, music, the art of “going with the flow”, a love and veneration of nature — all of these things have been strongly influenced by the Daoist worldview. Modern Chinese people may not consider these things “Daoist” or even know much about their Daoist origins. They just consider them as a part of Chinese culture. And while the practices of qigong, meditation, feng shui, Chinese medicine and taiji may not be of purely Daoist origin they have been heavily influenced by Daoist thought.

Likewise, in the West we may also be influenced by these ideas and concepts and not formally recognize ourselves as “Daoists” or even Dao People. But by allowing ourselves to have open mind/heart to these ideas and practices that come from the world of Dao, we cannot help but be benefited and made more whole and well-balanced people because of it.

Eva Wong, when I asked her if the practices and traditions do well when transplanted to the West, answered,

I think they do. I think that any wisdom tradition does, because the wisdom itself timeless and it’s the application that we need to work with to make them relevant to the times that we are living in. I think that’s really what makes these wisdom traditions great, they have been preserved throughout history, they are not frozen in time, so that the message is timeless. (8)

Let us work (and play) together to see what this new birth of Dao in the West might look and feel like. It is an exciting and challenging time and we have the wonderful
teachings and support of all the ancient achieved masters as well as modern teachers and guides.

It is not necessary to travel to China to learn about these things. There are many wonderful teachers here in the West. We have access to so many wonderful and helpful books and dvds. As Maoshing Ni says,

I think students today are much more privileged, in that the information is so much more readily available to them. They don’t realized how difficult it was to gather and preserve this knowledge over the years. Now we suddenly have the availability of it all at our fingertips, this time-tested wisdom of thousands of years. This is an exciting era when we can indeed make this available because people are open and they are ready to make a commitment to change their lives for the better, and help us make a better world. (9)

Please join me in this historical endeavor. Let me know how you are working (and playing) to bring these ancient yet up-to-date ideas and practices to fruition in your own life and community. As Dao People we remain open to new as well as ancient ideas and practices. Our bodies and energy systems are basically the same as in ancient times. Our environment is more challenging — the pace of modern life is much faster and more unhealthy; our food, water and air is more polluted, whether we live in China or the West, the stresses on our immune and nervous system are stronger — but all of this can and will be overcome if we are persistent enough in our practice, as we become ever more graceful with being able to apply the teachings and ideas of Dao to our own lives. If practiced diligently and deeply enough, the practices of meditation, qigong, taiji and internal alchemy (nei dan) will themselves become our teachers.

I look forward to hearing from you about your own explorations and experiences with Western Daoism and how they are impacting your life in various ways. Send me an email or letter and I will share them with our readers, both through our journal and our new website at www.communityawake.com. Please join me there in “cyber Dao” with your questions, your answers, your experiences, your teachings, realizations, struggles, openings and your journeys, both inner and outer into this amazing world of Dao.

To use the words of the Old Boy (Laozi):

Yield and become whole.
Bend and become straight.
Empty yourself and become filled.
Grow old yet become renewed.
Have little yet acquire much.
Have much yet become confused.
The sage “embraces the one”
And becomes a model
For all under heaven.
She is not aggressive
and so she is able to achieve greatness.
She does not boast
and so she is recognized by all.

She does not contend
And so no one under heaven contends with her.
The ancients said “Yield and become whole.”
Is this an empty saying?
Become whole and you will be restored to Dao.

(Endnotes)
1 Strength From Movement: Mastering Chi, by Hua-Ching Ni, SevenStar Communications Group Inc., 1994.
5. A Gathering of Cranes: Bringing the Tao to the West by Solala Towler, Abode of the Eternal Tao, 1996.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.

Solala Towler is editor/publisher of The Empty Vessel: The Journal of Daoist Philosophy and Practice and author of fourteen books on the Daoist arts. He has studied Daoist cultivation with teachers in the U.S. and China. For more information on his upcoming China tour or to find out about his qigong seminars go to his websites at www.CommunityAwake or www.abodetao.com.

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Daoist Nei Gong with Damo Mitchell

Fri Oct 5th, Sat Oct 6th, Sun Oct 7th

Friday October 5th: 7-8.30pm FREE Introductory Evening & Book Signing
This is a free event for those who would like an informal introduction to Daoist Nei Gong practices. Damo will give an overview of the Daoist internal arts and talk about the philosophy which underpins his teachings as well as answering questions and discussing Daoism. The evening will conclude with some internal practices as a warm-up for the weekend's events. Damo will also be available to sign his books/cds for participants.

Saturday Oct. 6th: 10.30-6.00pm $130 Nei Gong Foundations
This day long workshop will look at the core practices of Sung breathing and Daoist Qi Gong exercises. A strong foundation will be built and then the initial layers of Nei Gong training will gradually be added to the practice. The emphasis will be on gaining an understanding of the Daoist internal systems and freeing up blockages from the body.

Saturday Oct. 6th: 7-9pm $25 Daoist Meditation
On the Saturday evening, those who wish may join Damo for a special class which looks at the practice of Daoist meditation which is known as internal alchemy. Teaching will focus on initiating the firing process within the lower Dan Tien and awakening the small water wheel of Qi.

Sunday Oct. 7th: 10am-4pm $100 Daoist Nei Gong Practice
On the Sunday Damo will be teaching a day long workshop on the more advanced elements of Nei Gong training. The focus will be on gaining conscious control of the energy system and awakening it to clear pathogens from the energy body. Please note that some of the material in this workshop will be fairly advanced and so participants should have either prior knowledge of the internal arts or should have attended the workshop on Saturday.

Price for the whole weekend: $255
Max of 45 People on each day

Register at: www.columbiayoga.com
410-720-4340

Damo Mitchell is hosted in the US for the first time by Karl Ardo and his school; 'Moving in Stillness LLC’. Karl can be found at: www.movinginstillness.com

The workshop events are held in the Yoga Center of Columbia which can be found at: www.columbiayoga.com

The events are held at:
Parkridge Plaza Building, 8950 Route 108, Suite 109, Columbia, MD 21045

More info on Damo and his practices can be found at: www.lotusneigong.com

Damo Mitchell - Author & Daoist teacher.
Damo has studied the Eastern Arts since the age of four. He runs the Lotus Nei Gong School of Daoist Arts which can be found at: www.lotusneigong.com
Thoughts of Daoism often conjure up images of elderly sages practicing Qigong at sunrise in misty mountain hideaways in remote regions of China. Such romantic notions beckon us to rediscover ourselves, bringing our lives into tune with the flow of nature. But here in America, Daoist practice often takes on a sharply different role. We can well imagine how to find peace and harmony on a mountaintop, but perhaps the greater challenge is to find emptiness in the midst of such noise, confusion, fear, wanting, emotion and stimulation — the stress of modern life.

In a society wherein science refuses to accept the intangible, quite ironically, even the modern medical community recognizes the destructiveness of the invisible force called stress. Doctors of both East and West agree that the effects may be headaches, ulcers, muscle tightness, cardiac arrest, high blood pressure, impotence, insomnia, stroke, intestinal cramps, skin rashes and more. Stress causes disease.

How easy is just being still?
There is no greater proof of how stressed-out we are as when we first ever sit down to meditate. To be still and find emptiness is simple in theory; but for most people
living in today’s fast-paced societies, it is a painful and seemingly impossible feat. What looks easier than sitting or standing in one place for twenty or thirty minutes? According to the principles of yin and yang, stress creates the need for meditation, while meditation is impossible to achieve in a state of stress.

Traditional Chinese medicine states that most disease is a manifestation of some psychological or emotional imbalance. Until the imbalance is balanced, physical illness will never abate, even if it takes on a new form — a lesson that has eluded modern Western medicine and its symptom-chasing approach to healthcare. Mentally, stress creates anger, fear, addictions, compulsiveness, greed, hate, anxiety, and frustration. Then each of these maladies manifest into physical illnesses associated with specific organ systems.

Can ancient minds handle modern stress?

In studying the origins of stress and what to do about it, it helps to understand that we are all essentially the same creatures who lived in caves only a short 50,000 years ago. Little has evolved regarding our physical and mental selves — appearance, size of our brains, intellectual capacity, dream states, information processing, reflexes, instincts and sensibilities. The main difference between then and now is our advanced technology that has outpaced our minds and emotions.

We now have to deal with automobiles racing along at 70mph — an unnatural speed for all but the cheetah. We stare at computer screens for eight hours a day in air-conditioned offices, also unnatural. We live in square houses in neighborhoods in cities far from the animal kingdom and the quiet of the mountains, forests, oceans, rivers and plains. We have not evolved physically or mentally in the last 2,000 years, but the world which humankind created in a very short span of time is foreign, frightening, abstract, impersonal, unstable, relentless, cruel, inhumane, polluted, confusing and unnaturally paced.

We have created a monster (our modern world of technology) that has grown so out of control that it has turned against us and threatens to annihilate us. Unlike our ancient ancestors, we live under threat of the destruction of the planet, attacks from weapons capable of instantaneous mass annihilation, and the alteration of our air, water, food and soil that can put an end to life. The cancer rate is one-in-two, up from 25 percent only thirty years ago. Cancer therapist Dr. Carl Simonton says that for most cancer patients, “The period before the onset of the disease (cancer) held a number of major stresses.”

Today’s biggest threat is not from an invading tribe, but rather the politics and policies of big corporations and institutions filling our minds with delusions, insecurities, false promises, fears and misinformation for the sole purpose of making more money and building bigger empires. Megacorporations are working diligently to re-define the concept of nature, trying to persuade us to ingest isolated and synthetic vitamins and genetically engineered crops instead of foods; believe in the necessity of drugs, pesticides, and chemicals; and accept as fact those nightly, so-called news stories that are nothing short of propaganda. All the while we are being told that...
it is all “natural” and good. The result is overwhelming stress, not just on the mind, but also on the emotions and body, for all are one-in-the-same.

**Nature is discovered in emptiness**

Modern-day stress has produced marketing avenues and vehicles for charlatans, gurus and living “masters” claiming to take away our misery. They use the get-rich-quick formula for what they call “spirituality.” In our sophisticated, technological world, people are falling for the same nonsense as two thousand years ago. The further out of touch people are from nature and the natural pace of life, the more they fall for promises of instant relief, gratification and salvation. The mind is kept occupied and placated while the body is ignored and regarded only as a vehicle for the head. Daoism teaches that nature cannot be found in illusions, false promises and mind games. Nature is discovered in emptiness.

Without going anywhere, you can know the whole world. Without even opening your window, you can know the ways of Heaven.

**Appreciating the here and now**

You see: the further away you go, the less you know. Western religions not only fail to address our eternal state of wanting, but they even seem to foster the mindset, especially when preaching that heaven is eternal peace that comes after death. The appreciation for the here and now — the enjoyment for today — is lost in a confusing idealism. In essence, one of the main goals of most religions is to emotionally conquer death and embrace the promises of an afterlife. As such, the purpose of life becomes no more than a preparation for death.

Daoist philosopher Liehzi noted: The ancients regarded death as a going back, life as having to leave home. The sage keeps company with those who think of life and death just as one thinks of waking and sleeping, not with those who have forgotten the meaning of return. 3

When we live by the interpretation of another’s concept of god and the universe, then we lose our ability to find ourselves through our own experiences. We also lose our respect and connection with nature because we are liable to believe, as so many do today, that we should have dominion over nature — an ethnocentric belief that spells destruction for the natural world and deludes us into thinking that we are above the natural law and are-immune to the consequences that are arising out of the abuse of nature — the earth, the oceans, rivers, lakes, the air and the plant and animal kingdoms.

Daoist practice not only lets us recognize nature, but more importantly, opens us up to the fact that we ARE nature. To injure nature is to injure oneself. Moreover, when we discover nature, then we also come to understand patience and the fact that nature — including the healing process and personal development — takes time.

**The Dao is permeated with unity**

The wisdom in the practice of empty mind meditation is as appropriate today as it was thousands of years
ago, because human beings are the same. Daoist sage Liu I-ming (18th century), said, “Unfortunately, the Tao is not apparent to many people. How many understand that it is permeated with unity? People pursue trivialities, acting out their whims, their practice ignorantly mired in cults. All such people have abandoned the real and play with the false — after all, who among them can reach the true goal?” 4

Daoist exercise may be the antidote

Qigong has been used for millennia as a means of managing stress and bringing us into accord with nature. In his article, “How Qigong Can Help You Relax Out of Stress,” John Du Cane reminds us, “Qigong is like a practical course in acceptance and letting go. We learn how to conserve our energy and stay calm, whatever the pressures. We learn how to gain control of our inner being and take responsibility for enhancing the quality of our lives. These are skills you can use and apply for the rest of your life.” 5

One of the oldest Daoist exercises to counteract the effects of stress, called standing meditation, is still practiced today, with the greatest results early in the morning or just before bedtime. Yet, for most who begin the practice of qigong, simply standing still is a difficult task. Therefore, the following qigong exercise is an excellent way to begin for a month or so until standing meditation becomes plausible.

An exercise in emptiness

Begin by standing with legs a little less than shoulder distance apart.

Keep the spine erect, but the body relaxed, with a feeling of having the top of your head suspended by a string. A slight smile helps remove tension from the head and face. The eyes should relax and be half-closed to keep the “outside” world from distracting the mind. Slightly bend the knees and realize a sinking feeling at the lower dan tien (the point just below the navel and inside the body). The mind should become like an empty vessel, allowing the universe to flow through without focus on any single thought. With arms hanging to the sides, breathe slowly, fully and naturally from the lower diaphragm rather than the lungs. Very slowly and with minimum muscular tension, raise the arms, palms up until overhead, without stretching. Focus on relaxing every muscle in the shoulders and back as you go. Once extended overhead, slowly bring the lower arms (from elbow to fingers) down by bending at the elbows, palms passing down in front of the face, down in front of the chest and then stop to rest with bent elbows about 10 inches in front of the lower dantien (navel area) and elbows flaring relaxed away from the body.

Repeat the exercise three times followed by taking three minutes just standing with arms at the sides. When finished moving, stand silently for a few minutes.

The main difference between Daoist qigong exercises and meditation from other disciplines is that Daoists pay special attention not only to the condition of the mind, but, equally as important, to the body. To achieve release from tension, qigong meditation is not a concentration or visualization exercise, but rather one of melding with nature by achieving emptiness rather than nothingness.


Vic Shayne, Ph.D. is author of Illness Isn’t Caused by a Drug Deficiency!, Whole Nutrition: The Missing Link in Vitamin Therapy, as well as a clinical nutritionist, whole food supplement formulator, certified Chinese Lymphatic Massage therapist, writer and qigong student under the tutelage of Zhu Xilin, protege of Sher Ming featured in Bill Moyers’ television special on Chinese healing. Vic’s website is nutritionresearchcenter.org
The following books have been written by Professor Jerry Alan Johnson and contain translated texts from ancient Zheng Yi Daoist Mysticism and are introduced for the first time in English!

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Where does the wind chime go? Where should I have the mirror? Where is my wealth corner and how can I build it up?

When the subject of Feng Shui comes up, these are among the most frequently asked questions. And yet they have very little to do with the ancient discipline. So then what is Feng Shui? To answer that, we could look at the roots of this ancient discipline, what it meant to the ancient people, and what it can mean to our lives today.

Classical Feng Shui (pronounced foong shway) has very little to do with good luck charms. Back in 1986 a skilled master was interviewed by a famous writer, published in major magazines, and suddenly had many people who wanted to have their homes analyzed, many people who wanted to take classes. But they didn’t want to do math. So the skilled master used Occam’s razor and took a thin slice of the surface of Feng Shui for those people.

Classical Feng Shui is a discipline like architecture or interior design and requires discipline and diligent study. Well, you might ask, if Classical Chinese Feng Shui is not about hanging wind chimes, then what is it? How can I set it up? And how can it benefit me?

First and foremost, Feng Shui is one of the eight healing disciplines that were passed down from the medicine men of ancient China. And although its applications are diverse, Feng Shui for people started as a study of healing energy and how to bring it to your family.

The ancient Chinese called the healing energy in nature Chi (qi). One good way to think about chi is as the difference between fresh air and stale air — air that vitalizes you as opposed to air that makes you tired. If you live next to a flower garden and see the blossoms and smell their aroma every day, over a period of time that does something to you. On the other hand, if you live next to an overpass and hear the traffic and smell the exhaust every day, over a period of time that also does something to you.

The first healing discipline is what we call in the modern world meditation, in Chinese Da Tsoa, meaning to sit quietly. When you sit quietly, you can observe the movements of your mind and capture guidance and helpful impulses. The healing effects of meditation on high blood pressure and various other ailments are well documented. Meditation can be thought of as the study of the path of healing breath through the mind.
The second healing discipline is tonic herbs. The ancient people studied how to use herbs to replace the energy that was stale in tired inner organs. This discipline can be described as the path of healing breath through the things we eat.

The third healing discipline is breath exercise. This includes Taiji, Qigong, Yoga, martial arts — any exercise designed to use movement to massage and flex the internal organs to improve circulation and pull in something extra from the air we breathe. This discipline can be thought of as the path of healing breath through human movement.

The fourth healing discipline is Feng Shui. This can be thought of as the study of the paths of fresh and stale energy through places where humans spend time.

The fifth healing discipline is acupressure, which developed from empirical observation, like Feng Shui. Acupuncture was developed primarily from two sets of observations: First, pain referral — if my arm aches in a particular place and I rub it, I might feel an additional sore spot somewhere else. If I rub the second sore spot, the ache gets better at the first one. The second set of observations was from war. If a Chinese gentleman went to war and was shot with an arrow and it didn't kill him, he might go home and notice, you know, the pain in my stomach is better. Let's see, the hole is two and one quarter inches from my shoulder. The ancient people were meticulous record keepers. After generations of accumulating observations, they mapped over three hundred points.

Similarly, in the ancient world, when a family wanted to have a son who would become a great physician, the masters would study the homes of families who gave birth to a great physician and find out if they fell into four or five patterns. They would do the same for a great diplomat, a great writer, a great saint. Through looking for patterns in the environment, they could observe what kind of thought is stimulated by different surroundings. Acupuncture is the path of healing breath through lines of acupuncture points running through the human body.

The sixth healing discipline is moxibustion, which is burning herbs over the acupuncture point instead of piercing it with a needle. This is the path of healing breath through fire.

The seventh healing discipline is Tui Na or Chinese massage. Chinese massage does not require a lot of strength like some methods do. It requires knowledge of the meridians of healing breath through the human body so that the path can be unblocked by the masseur's hands. This is the path of healing breath through human touch.

The eighth healing discipline is astrology, not so much in the sense of personality as in the sense of biorhythms. If you know that the breath of a certain day is good for someone of your body type, you start new projects. If you know that the breath of a certain day is not so good for someone of your body type, you finish up old projects. The ancient Chinese made the most sophisticated study of biorhythms that mankind had ever seen. This is the path of healing breath through time.

Healing breath needs an unobstructed path through an environment. In other words, every object in the environment — the doors, the windows, the furnishings,
our bodies, the trees, the neighboring buildings — every object in the physical world is a filter for the fresh or the stale energy in nature. Feng Shui is the study of physical objects as filters of healing breath, and of how that healing breath can be channeled for inspiration, profitable ideas, and human relationships.

Classical Feng Shui can be traced back 3,800 years through archaeological evidence. Beginning in 1100 BC, it was first called Di Li, which in ancient Chinese means, "to read the land," and was practiced under this name until the Han Dynasty (220BC). After 220 BC and up until the fourth century AD, it was called Kan Yu, meaning, "to examine closely a huge piece of land," to see how to build on it, to protect the people working there, living there. The discipline received its current name during the fourth century and has retained it until today, though the discipline and rigors of the practice were commercialized and simplified in the late twentieth century.

Upon making the appointment I take the birthdates of the people who use the space so that I can check the

body type and know what each family member needs from their space. The first breath inhaled when one is born contains some of all wuxingqi (five elements) but in different proportions depending upon the time of birth. Because of this, the organs of the body each receive a different proportion of the blood from the first beat of the heart. The different proportions of the blood from the first pulse result in different relative strengths for each of the organs.

Upon arriving at the site, I read the patterns of nearby buildings and landscape and whether they match or mismatch those of the site I am asked to read. The surroundings are nine times more influential than what is inside because the surroundings determine the quality of qi going into the windows and doors.

I use a luopan to measure the influences on the main door. I would not use a GPS for this — the building doesn't need a direction since it isn't going anywhere. But if the needle on the compass trembles or is diverted to one side or another, I need to know this since it will affect the people going through the door.

When I analyze a house, I walk through twice, the first time to see how the doors are connected, the second to make recommendations. The client asks questions, I make comments. The recommendations made are then prioritized.

Wyiming Sun began learning Taoist arts from his father, a native Chinese, at age 7, in New Orleans, Louisiana. In 1992, he became an "indoor pupil" of a master from Taiwan (the fourth ranking master of the Blue Dragon Lineage, a union of masters from Taiwan that practice Feng Shui for Asian corporations). In nearly two decades of international travel and teaching, Sun has practiced on hundreds of residences, corporation headquarters, public buildings (including a cancer hospital in Vancouver where patient stays were reduced by 22 percent after his work), and businesses, the latter including a health spa in Los Angeles which keeps expanding after each of his consultations.

For private consultations or public presentations, contact Wyiming Sun at (646) 713-9184 or housemagic2000@yahoo.com.
Imagine that you are standing under a waterfall. The water pounds down on your head and shoulders and pins your feet to the ground. The steady rush of water feels good. At times, it feels ecstatic.

But often the force of the water is too much. It hurts. You want it to stop. You tilt your body slightly, hoping to find a gap in the sheets of water cascading down on you. You do, and for a moment the pain lessens. But then the full force of the water finds you again. The pain is intense. You feel trapped.

Now imagine that one day, for no reason you can think of, you step back from the waterfall. You had no idea there was a space behind you the whole time, a cavern cut into the rock that easily accommodates your frame. The relief you feel is immense. Your body feels light. You witness the water pouring down inches from your nose. The inches seem like miles. Now the water begins to flow from you. Tears of joy are streaming down your cheeks. You have stepped away from the steady rush of water, from the endless cycle of pleasure and pain you’d been experiencing for as long as you can remember.

We spend our lives immersed in a flood of thoughts, unaware that another dimension of consciousness is available to us. It is a dimension in which we come to know ourselves as something other than thinkers. By taking a step back, we become the witness of our thoughts. Of the millions of steps we’ve taken in our lives, this subtle but radical step may be the most important because it leads to a profound sense of peace.

We cannot think our way into this witnessing dimension. It only emerges when thought subsides, hopping like a bunny from the bushes when the coast is clear. The thoughts that pleaded for our attention gradually recede in the presence of our steady witnessing gaze. In this transformative moment we have stepped back from the flow of thought into the serene space of our awareness.

This space is not as mystical as it might seem. Haven’t we all experienced moments when we’ve witnessed the
thoughts flowing through our minds without getting dragged into their current?

Have you ever quarreled with someone and refrained from expressing a hurtful thought that surfaced in your mind? How were you able to perceive that thought? Was it illuminated by the light of your awareness?

Have you ever sat on an airplane, minutes before takeoff, fearing that it was going to crash and that you’d never see your loved ones again? What stopped you from unbuckling your seatbelt and bolting for the door? Was it because you were aware, if only vaguely, that the thoughts parading through your mind were a bit farfetched?

We experience these brief but revealing glimpses of our witnessing capacity without recognizing their value. We move past them inattentively, the way we might a Rembrandt at a yard sale. But to spend one clear-eyed moment in this space is to observe that the territory of thought is limited, that it is easily contained within the greater space of our awareness. This flash of insight will awaken us to a new identity. By observing thought, we are born as its witness.

If we wish to dwell rather than dart in and out of this vibrant dimension, we must do more than simply change the way we think; we must change our relationship with thought. We must become its ever-present witness to avoid being its ever-suffering accomplice. Helpful one moment and devious the next, thought is like a petulant child requiring our constant attention.

As thought’s witness, we are its master. We can summon it if we wish to bake a cake or split an atom, and dismiss it when it shows up uninvited. But for this cozy relationship with thought to last, we must keep it permanently in our sights. This will take every ounce of energy we have, and at first even that won’t be enough. We have been thought’s servant for so long that we’ll continue to obey it by sheer habit.

But in time our tolerance for suffering at the hands of thought will lessen. The pleasure will no longer seem worth the pain. And those isolated moments when we glimpse the chains and pulleys driving our thought process will begin to connect like stars in a constellation. As we step further and further back from the realm of thought, we will see it in its entirety and know that we exist beyond its borders.

My writing attempts to demystify the sometimes perplexing teachings of our great spiritual leaders so that more may be exposed to their wisdom. They appear on my website, On Second Thought, www.johnptacek.com.
The Tai Chi Sword and Spiritual Swordsmanship

Hua-Ching Ni and Mao Shing Ni
In governing one’s life
One learns not to be aggressive.
If force is used,
Internal harmony is disturbed
And self-destruction will follow.
It is not often worth it to fight over material gain.
The gentle way can always help you achieve your correct goal.
Lao Tzu

**Spiritual Swordsmanship and the Internal School**

The school of spiritual swordsmanship has a long historical background. It began with the tradition of the Way and combined martial arts with spiritual practice. All students were trained this way to different degrees. They deepened the art and kept their purpose strictly secret. They worked to achieve one goal: to deter and thwart evil.

Some government officials were powerful and malevolent. Such tyrants would receive an ultimatum from the spiritual swordsmen to improve their harmful behavior or be punished. This was done by Mo Tzu’s descendants or spiritual heirs. Their way of fighting evil was similar to western chivalry and the tradition of the knight errant.

By the way, the word “school,” as it was used in ancient times, refers to a group of people who share similar beliefs or a common goal. A school was not a formal classroom situation like today’s schools.

A spiritually achieved person in the School of Internal Swordsmanship could use his achieved mind to decapitate an officer who was a hundred or a thousand miles away. That kind of power is described in Chinese literature, but such a thing cannot be proven.

In the beginning, chivalrous swordsmen came from Mo Tzu’s school. Later, the School of Spiritual Swordsmanship of Master Lu Tung-Ping and Master Zhang San-Feng followed the moral discipline of Mo Tzu and developed further to include physical movement, which could be converted into martial arts.

Now we follow all true sages who teach courage and who help the world through spiritual development. However, some people who learn spiritual development have a different understanding of worldly problems. No one should adopt the practice of killing anyone out of righteousness. The existence of evil in politics is due to two things: first, systems of monarchy and dictatorship, and second, the lack of individual development. The solution to bad government lies in education, not killing. The solution to the lack of personal development is obviously spiritual cultivation. Good self-government is the best foundation for social government. Thus, the focus of the spiritual practice of swordsmanship has changed to include teaching people how to be spiritual knight errants instead of social radicals who take extreme action.

Transforming your own evil, not killing other people, is the only thing that can transform the world. In the first place, it is neither our responsibility nor our privilege to judge others. The enjoyment of killing is a symptom of spiritual undevelopment. Thus, if you wish to help the world, do it through developing yourself first and then through spiritual teaching, not through killing.

Moral courage is nurtured by gentle physical movement, which gives you confidence in yourself. The training and preparation to become a teacher of spiritual swordsmanship is the same as that for the martial arts. The only difference is in the way the goal is achieved.

There is no doubt that the world needs help from capable people. Those who wish to offer help through spiritual and peaceful means must have the moral courage of knights of old. Those who act in what looks like evil ways simply do not understand the subtle part of life and need to develop themselves more.

Actually, if you were to kill someone whom you think is an evil person, you would kill only the body; the energy cannot be killed. Rather than trying to kill something that can’t be killed, we need to improve and change any environment that fosters the growth of evil. Thus, it is better to leave the body of a so-called evil doer alive, and work in positive ways toward transforming the sociocultural environment. This is the new direction of the school of the spiritual swordsman. For this purpose, a new type of martial art and weapon exercises were developed.

**The Power of the Invisible Sword Is the Power of Your Own Spirit**

Certain physical practices can be used to attain spiritual development; however, if you learn the skills but not the spirit, then you are not yet a student of the School of Spiritual Swordsmanship. This is why we are careful when we teach the skill. At the same time, we need to point out the direction or goal of its origin, which is to help other people develop themselves spiritually.

Thank you for your interest in learning this art. Always remember that it is only for your self-protection. You do not have the right to judge others and use the skill against them.

**The Spiritual Power of the Sword**

When I (OmNi) was practicing Traditional Chinese Medicine in Taiwan, I taught Tai Chi movement. At that time, Tai Chi was taught as a martial art.
If you are in the business of teaching martial arts and wish to attract students, you need good achievement or no one will recognize you as a teacher. I was doing quite well in martial arts, but my livelihood came from my medical practice.

One day, an older student who came from northeastern China brought a precious sword from his hometown. It had belonged to someone else, and he had received it as a gift. He was the manager of a big factory who had good business training. I taught him internal Qigong to increase his health, and he gave the sword to me as a gift. I protected it well, but it still needed some special care to prevent it from becoming rusty.

One noon, I wished to clean the sword, so I pulled it out from its sheath. I should not have done that at noontime, but I was busy, and that was the only free time I had. The sheath was hard to remove, so I needed to use some force to take the sword out. I pulled out the sword; a big rat who was hurt by this somewhat intense energy fell down from the ceiling. It had died on the spot and had no apparent wound in its body. It was hurt by the energy. Friends jokingly described the rat as the evil spirit that happened to hide in my ceiling wishing to steal my energy.

This experience proved to me that the mythology of a good sword’s spiritual power is possible. Because I do not have any enemies, my sword has never killed anybody, but that occasion proved that the sword has spiritual power. The sword is power, and the power is a sword.

I gave that sword to a student before I left Taiwan, because such a thing could not be taken out of the country. I hope he is still taking good care of it.

Many stories have been told about precious swords. Some were said to jump down from the wall on which they hung to respond to their master and kill an enemy, or they would make a noise to warn of intruders.

The higher level of spiritual sword was not made of metal, but of personal spiritual energy. Such a sword could kill evil and protect its master’s personal spiritual essence.

The School of Spiritual Swordsmanship

Master Lu Tung-Ping of the Tang Dynasty (618-906 C.E.), and Master Zhang San-Feng who came after him, both achieved the art and virtue that belonged to the School of Spiritual Swordsmanship. They also belonged to the School of Golden Immortal Medicine which is the practice of internal and external alchemy2.

The School of Spiritual Swordsmanship and the School of Golden Immortal Medicine are both heritages of the Integral Way. The internal school is an entirely spiritual practice. It is different from the external school, which develops physical energy for fighting. The ancient sages used physical movement to guide students to learn the limitation of physical strength, and thus lead them into spiritual practice.

Physical movement is a tool for spiritual training. Because spirit itself has no form or shape, it cannot be controlled without a certain physical form, shape or movement. For most people, spiritual practice is just the practice of mind through reading, recitation, chanting or prayer. Generally, they do not consider that spiritual practice comes through being. Whatever you do, you become. Thus, doing any of the gentle movements is more beneficial and direct than praying. Prayer is external, because a person prays to external beings, by chanting or reciting a sutra or whatever. The Integral Way goes directly to your life being and is directly involved with your life movement.

The Sword and Spiritual Cultivation

New generations continue the spirit of the Spiritual Swordsman by accepting the invisible sword as a metaphor for cultivating and refining their spirit. Let us explain further.

In Chinese culture, the materials used to make a sword need to go through a long process. A great quantity of pig iron must be refined to produce the quality of steel fit for a sword. In ancient times, a sword was usually made by using water and fire. Metal was heated in the fire, shaped, and then put into water to be cooled. This process was repeated over and over again. It took many repetitions to make a sword so refined and sharp that it could split a hair, and making a sword turn out well required great spiritual attention. It was not a simple procedure, sometimes it took years. Some swords were so finely made that they were not only very sharp, but were also very flexible. They could be bent back or curved, but when released would return to their original straightness.

This process is similar to the process of spiritual cultivation. The development of human spirits is similar to the process of alternating heat and cold.

Through the heat of fire and cold of water, a person’s soul becomes firm and right to the point. The water and the fire in a person’s life are the troublesome circumstances and experiences through which one learns to improve oneself and develop an indestructible and undefeatable character.

Spiritual swordsmanship is not based on the sharpness of cutting with a physical sword, but upon the greater power of rightousness and harmony.
The Attainment of Spiritual Refinement

When I (OmNi) was a teenager, most people in China did not like to leave their home town. However, an elder encouraged me to do so. He said, “If you wish to face the entire world, your hometown is not the place to stay. Only by meeting trials and ordeals will you become mature. A person of the Way makes all towns his home, all nations his nation and all people his kin. The way to achieve oneself in the Way is by first learning to give up all easily obtained support from others, then to create your own life by meeting all possible difficulties. The strongest spirit can only be realized by going through the overly heated fire and overly cold ice of life circumstances. If one can rise above them, one has mastered life.”

When I was young, I was not smart enough to be a student of spiritual immortality. Instead, I was attracted by physical arts and the great swordsmen in stories. It was not until later that I deeply appreciated the type of spiritual swordsmanship described by Chuang Tzu in his story of the butcher who used his knife for nineteen years without sharpening it. It had no nicks or dents because of the butcher’s refinement and skill in the use of the blade. That was a great education. Refinement is something that we need to learn and use in our daily lives. This is especially true today because of the interdependence of many elements of modern life. People live by supporting one another. A cooperative spirit and a willingness to help are needed.

The reward of teaching is the spiritual development of all people. My spiritual teaching comes from my achievement in swordsmanship, while my teaching of physical arts is from my spiritual learning. My private joy is practicing the arts.

Spiritual Swordsmanship and Health

Once I (OmNi) had an interesting experience. I got a cold, but I could not stop seeing patients because the appointments were already made. I was suffering from the cold and sat in my chair in the early morning. My vision started acting; I saw myself doing some sword dancing. Suddenly, I understood that doing sword dancing was the cure for my cold. So I did the sword dancing to force the virus out by a little sweating, got over the suffering and went back to work.

Similar inspiration comes to me, for my work, writing or other activities. A positive, busy minded person can always receive spiritual help if he is quietly listening for it. The attitude of rushing and haste always slows down the expected good harvest. All teachings given were also received in the same way.

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For newcomers to the way of the Dao, there is an observation about qigong that soon arrives, “How many forms of qigong are there and what forms should I learn?” For the experienced traveler on the road of the Dao, a common observation of qigong is, “How can I ever do all the forms of qigong that I learn?” Both are excellent questions.

To answer how many forms of qigong there are, I use a term from the Daode Jing, “There are a myriad of forms.” My first teacher, Dr. Martin Eisen, used to put the estimate at around 2,000. As to how many forms should you learn, I offer an old Daoist adage that I have integrated into my life. “Learn everything you can and then forget it.” What exactly does this mean? Well, there are a myriad of meanings that you see from different levels of experience. One is, learn things and then do not worry about or fret over them. When you need them, they will emerge from your subconscious and serve you.

As to – “How can I ever do all of the forms I know?” I suggest a method I have used for several years now. Admittedly, you may not be able to use this every day but that is okay. For everyday use, use the form that has naturally become your foundation. For some it’s Eight Pieces of Brocade a true standard, or the Tree or whatever it is.

I try whenever possible to get into nature and do qigong. It may be a special trip or a regular walk in nature or a simple backyard session. But I have always found qigong to be empowered when performed outdoors.

When outdoors I simply let nature lead me to decide what form of qigong I perform. It is that simple, as is most of life when the Dao is followed. Not always easy but always simple. There is the conundrum, as it always seems to be when you follow the Dao. How you let nature lead you is your decision, as are all of your decisions. This is your life, not your teacher’s. This may get me in trouble with some teachers who want their students to do what they say, oh well I don’t care. This is the essence of what makes Daoism so special and so wonderful. Daoism is the way of living and experiencing your life.

What I am going to do is to guide you through a couple of experiences I have had in allowing nature to be my guide, as a demonstration of what I mean.
One day I went into the New Jersey Pine Barrens, where I live, for a trek in nature. It was a warmer day a few weeks ago in winter. It was my intention to find a location and perform qigong in this pristine wilderness.

I started out with my usual pre-walk experience of prayer and offering incense and herbs for guidance in my walk. Now this is my ritual, do not think it has to be yours. Then I proceeded on my trek. When coming to a fork in the road, I stopped until I felt drawn one way or the other.

A few weeks earlier I was at the same spot with my six year old son Alex, who has in a previous article been called Sifu Alex because he teaches me so much. Alex asked what way we should go, as he was leading. I had him go into the standing tree position, close his eyes and ask for guidance. By his second breath, a large branch fell out of a tree to our left and he said, “Guess we go that way.” The signs are not always that dramatic but sometimes they are. I have actually been hit on the head by branches.

Drawn to the right, I felt I knew where to go. There was a spot in a very hard to reach area that I sometimes visited that was very powerful. It lay between two running brooks. There were several ways to enter, all difficult. The area seemed to be guarded by thick undergrowth and immense thorns and downed trees and logs.

I travelled into the area and went into a standing posture, relaxed and breathed, again asking for guidance. Eventually something caught my eye to the left. It looked like a tunnel through the thorns and stickers – an actual tunnel through them.

Slowly walking over, I saw that the branches had curved and bent, forming a tunnel through them. An obvious sign, easy peasy. Wrong. The tunnel was only about 4 feet high and I was carrying a backpack. I had just received a new camera for Christmas and wanted to try shooting some nature shots and always carried water and a first aid kit out here. So, bending over I started in. I had to crouch low for the backpack to clear. You can see the worn out deer path on the ground through the “tunnel.”

As I reached the end of the tunnel, when my eyes, which had adjusted to my “nature eyes”, had become fined tuned to things you would not normally see, saw on the forest floor, a clear sign – deer droppings, fairly fresh. I was entering a deer’s home. Soon after coming out of the tunnel and standing straight up, I looked ahead and saw another sign, a tree with its bark scraped off – not only a deer’s home, but a mature buck who was rubbing his antlers against the tree to leave scent markings. The scrapes were fresh with saps flowing and bright. Fresh
rubbed scraping off of a cedar.

Further along the walk I found more droppings. I came to a clearing where I usually do my taiji quan and qigong work and dropped my pack. Looking to the west I saw another tree bearing scraping marks.

Based upon all of these signs, it was my decision to perform a qigong set taught to me long ago known as “The Deer.” I will not go into the actual performance of the exercise but it involves stretching the lower back, using a pelvic tilt and contraction of the testicles in coordination with breathing. Part of the performance is a movement imitating a deer pawing the ground in front of it.

Now I had learned this exercise over 20 years ago and forgotten all about it. Then I attended a qigong class presented by Christine Barrera at the National Qigong Conference in Valley Forge, Pa, during the summer. In that class Christine presented an exercise that was similar to “The Deer,” which reminded me of that exercise. Time for another Daoist adage, “There are no coincidences.” Perhaps had I not attended that class, I would not have remembered “The Deer” in such detail to be able to perform it. Perhaps I was being led to that day in the woods way back in the summer. Who knows, but the ways of the Dao are truly mysterious.

At other times I will do Six Healing Sounds and take cues from nature as to when and what sounds I should do. At the strong smell of a pine or cedar I will do the liver sound for its correspondence to wood. Or stepping into a clearing and being hit by a bright sun, I will do the heart sign for its correspondence to fire.

All of this is based on one thing though, recognizing nature signs. Do not be put off from this even if you live in a city. Nature signs surround you no matter where you live. Birds fly, bugs move, plants bloom, seasons turn no matter where you live. What, bugs? Yes bugs, for instance an encounter with a spider can be a sign. Arachnoids have eight legs – Eight Pieces of Brocade, a Bagua form and so on. You just allow the nature sign to lead you.

What if you’re wrong in your interpretation? Simple, you can’t be wrong, it’s your interpretation. No matter what, you’re right.

When you follow the Dao, teachers come and teachers go. Good and true teachers are hard to find. These things are true. But nature will always be there. Nature will always be a good and true leader and teacher; on this you can be sure.

A serious student of martial arts for 37 years, Kurt Levins holds the rank of Master in the Lu Shan Taoist Lineage. He holds a Masters ranking in Tai Chi Chuang in the lineage of Li I Yu and Internal Kung Fu under master Lein Cheng Chen of Taiwan. Levins has also complete studies at the Philadelphia Institute of Chinese Medicine. As Director of the Pinelands Institute for Taoist Studies he conducts training in the New Jersey Pine Barrens. Mr. Levins teaches several forms of taiji, qigong and other Taoist arts. He can be reached at intao@hotmail.com or 856.797.5987.

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Lee Holden is an internationally celebrated qi gong master who has appeared regularly on PBS. He is a doctor of Chinese medicine, a licensed acupuncture, and an international instructor in qigong, meditation, t'ai chi, and stress management. Currently, Lee is the co-founder of the Santa Cruz Integrative Medicine and Chi Center.

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Level one Qigong exercises
I have included all the warm-up exercises from the previous section for your convenience. Each of the following Qigong exercise levels includes these exercises so you won't have to flip back to the opening section.

Always begin the exercise session with your patients with all or some of the warm-ups. If time is an issue, use two or three of the following exercises that you feel will give them the best warming. I encourage you to experiment until you find the right combination for those instances when time is limited. Remember, you can read the instructions directly off the page if you wish since they are written as though directed toward an individual reading the book.

Qigong warm-up exercises

Gathering Qi

Benefits: This warm-up exercise brings the qi that may be trapped in other areas of the body into the lower dan tian. It is from this area that the energy should be pulled upward to the middle dan tian and, eventually, into the upper dan tian, the repository for mental and spiritual energy.

Sit comfortably with your back against the back of your chair, hips tucked slightly under. Make sure your legs are shoulder-width apart. Lift your head as though it is being pulled gently upward by a string attached to the ceiling.

Place your right hand over your lower dan tian. To be certain that your hand is in the right place, rest your right thumb on your navel. Your hand will then naturally rest on the lower dan tian. Place your left hand over your right.

Breathe in deeply through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Continue to breathe deeply but naturally for at least one full minute.

Stimulating Qi

Benefits: As your patients’ arms are swung back and forth, the qi from the lower dan tian will surge upwards and out to their fingertips. The forward swing lifts the energy to the middle dan tian and then out along the arms. This exercise is both soothing and energizing.

Check your posture to be sure your feet are still shoulder-width apart and your hips are tucked under so that the small of your back is resting against the back of your chair.

Make certain that your arms are on the outside of the arms of your chair at a sufficient distance so you don’t bang against the sides as you swing your arms.

Begin by swinging your arms backward. Allow both arms to swing forward naturally. Don’t try to time your breathing with this exercise. Continue to breathe in through your nose and expel the toxins out through your mouth in your normal breathing rhythm.

Begin with at least 36 swings. You may increase the number of swings as you progress.

Spreading Qi

Benefits: This exercise will seem familiar because it is something we all do unconsciously and automatically when we’re cold. By gently slapping their thighs and arms, your patients will be increasing the circulation in their limbs and distributing the qi throughout their bodies.

Begin by crossing your arms. Slap your arms gently from the elbows up to the shoulders and back down to the elbows again. Do not try to time your breathing to the slaps.

Sit forward on your chair so that you won’t hit your arms while you do this exercise. Swing your arms out to the sides and then slap them against your thighs. Continue to breathe naturally—not in time with your arm movements.

Start with 36 slaps on your arms and 36 on your legs.

Note: Your patients may increase the pressure of their slaps or build up to a larger number if you judge it is safe to do so, but never to the point of soreness or bruising.

Lifting Your Qi

Benefits: By lifting each leg, your patients are pushing the qi upward into their trunks. As the feet are placed back on the floor, the acupressure points on the soles of the feet are stimulated. See the diagram of foot acupressure points in Appendix B.

Sit back against the back of your chair again. Tuck your hips underneath you so that the small of your back is supported against the back of your chair. Feet and legs should be shoulder-width apart.

Keep your foot parallel to the floor as you lift it to the height of your abdomen or chest (see Figure 2.1, page 26). Change feet and repeat.

Continue lifting your legs alternately for at least nine sets with each leg, if possible.

Again, you may increase the number of lifts as long as your
thigh muscles don’t become overly tense. Qigong should be performed in a relaxed way; don’t allow yourself to become tense as you go through the exercises.

Centering Qi

Benefits: If the qi has become trapped in an area of the body as a result of putting too much emphasis on one exercise or the other or on one side of the body or the other, this exercise will restore the qi to its proper balance. Remember, breathing for this exercise is reverse breathing or pre-birth. When your patients breathe in, remind them to contract the diaphragm, then relax just the lower abdomen when the stale air is released from their lungs out through the mouth.

Hold your hands palm up just above your lap, fingertips touching. Breathe in deeply through your nose while contracting your diaphragm. It is only in this one exercise that the diaphragm is not expanded during inhalations.

As you tighten your diaphragm and abdomen, raise your arms out to the side and up over your head to its center. Your palms are now facing the ceiling, fingers barely touching.

Allow your arms to descend gradually in an arc out to the side. As you do so, exhale until there is no breath left in your lungs and relax just the muscles of your lower abdomen.

Return your arms to the original position in front of the lowest part of your abdomen, palms upward.

Qigong exercises

The Crane

Benefits: This exercise is part of a standard Qigong meditation. Your patients should be as relaxed and attentive to the movement of their breath as possible. Encourage your patients to concentrate and to avoid letting their minds wander into worrisome thoughts. If you have eliminated all environmental distractions before you begin this session with your patients and if this “experiencing” meditation is practiced consistently by your patients on their own in between their meetings with you, they will achieve an improved state of tranquility.

As you breathe in through your nose, expand your diaphragm. Imagine that your hands are gathering the cleansing qi into your lower dan tian.

As you breathe in, gently press your back into the chair.

As you blow out the toxins, imagine that your hands are helping to push the breath out through your mouth. Move forward and downward so that your back is no longer pressed against the back of your chair. In other words, rock slightly forward and lean ever so slightly toward your thighs.

Repeat for at least a full minute. If you can manage it, increase the time to five minutes.

The Turtle

Benefits: These meditative exercises all contribute to reducing stress and fatigue. Because they are so gentle and performed so slowly, internal organs are nourished and the stress placed on these organs as the result of lifestyle, injury, illness, or surgery will be greatly lessened.

Continue the gentle swaying, rocking movement that you used in the previous exercise. Shorten your neck as you breathe a cleansing breath into your lower abdomen.

Your back should remain pressed against the back of your chair during the inward breath. Feel the breath with your hands (still pressed against your lower abdomen) as the cleansing breath enters through your nose.

As you breathe out, pull slightly away from the chair and stretch your neck upward (Figure 2.6).

Continue the movements for at least a full minute, extending to five minutes when you have the time and feel that you have perfected the neck retractions as well as the swaying/rocking motion.

The Deer

Benefits: This exercise will benefit your patients in two ways. Deep breathing will flood the system with oxygen and enhance the movement of the qi. In addition, these movements will stimulate the energy from the lower dan tian (the jing), for increased sexual or physical energy.
The Empty Vessel

Figure 2.7 The Deer

Remain in the usual posture with your feet flat on the floor, the small of your back pressed against the back of your chair. Keep your hands on your lower abdomen to stimulate the drawing of energy into your abdomen.

Lift upward with the muscles around your tailbone as you inhale and expand your abdomen. As you blow the air out of your mouth, tighten your abdominal muscles and lean forward slightly with a gentle rocking motion (Figure 2.7).

Repeat the motions, the breathing, and the muscle contractions for at least a full minute. If time allows, work up to five minutes.

**Balancing the Triple Warmer**

**Benefits:** Three organs comprise the “Triple Warmer” or “Triple Burner”—the heart, the lungs, and the stomach. This exercise, however, goes beyond these three organs to stimulate and regulate the spleen and the liver as well.

Begin in the same posture as in the exercise above.

Lace your fingers, lifting your arms upward over your head. At the same time, roll up on the balls of your feet.

Press your heels back onto the floor as you bring your hands to the top of your head.

Stretch your arms over your head, twisting your hands so the palms are facing toward the ceiling. At the same time, roll up onto the balls of your feet.

Continue rolling up on the balls of your feet, pressing your laced hands (palms up) toward the ceiling, alternating with palms down, pressing gently on the top of the head and lowering your heels to the floor.

**Shooting the Bow**

**Benefits:** Once again, your patients will be stimulating meridians and internal organs during this exercise. Their arm and shoulder muscles will be stretched and tightened, helping to eliminate underarm flabbiness. This is also an excellent exercise for improving breathing and strengthening lungs. Some Chinese medical practitioners believe that this exercise also benefits the kidneys.

Check that you haven’t moved away from the back of your chair; reposition your feet and your back if necessary.

Bring your hands under your chin with backs facing (Figure 2.8). Push out with your right arm to the right side and turn your head so that you are looking toward your extended arm.

Open your right hand so that your index finger is pointed to the side while the middle finger, ring finger, and little finger are curled slightly toward your palm.

At the same time your right arm is moving out to the right, close your left hand into a fist and press your left elbow out to the side so that both arms are parallel to the floor (Figure 2.9).

Reverse and repeat at least nine times on each side.

**Big Bear Turns from Side to Side**

**Benefits:** Big Bear Turns from Side to Side helps to regulate heart rate and exercises the lungs. This exercise is also beneficial in trimming the waist. Hips and abdominal and lower back muscles will be tightened and stretched. If your patients are experiencing back pain or stiffness, this exercise—performed gently, of course—will be of great benefit in releasing those overly tight muscles.

Plant your feet firmly on the floor, shoulder-width apart, and press the small of your back against the back of your chair by tucking your hips underneath you. Take a deep breath through your nose before you move to the next step.

Blow out through your nose as you bend forward from your hips and swing your torso to the left. At the same time, turn your head so that you are looking at the wall to your left.

Swing back to the middle, shifting your eyes to the wall directly in front of you, and breathe in through your nose. Do not raise your back but, rather, swing directly to the right in the same bent-over position. Remember to turn your head in the direction of the movement so that this time you are looking at the wall to your right.

Lift up and return to your original upright position. Again, take a deep breath in through your nose and swing your
torso over your right thigh as you exhale and look toward
the wall to your right. Swing to the left and then return
to your upright position.

Repeat this gentle pendulum motion, alternating sides for a
minimum of 12 repetitions. It is most important that you
swing to the left and to the right an equal number of times.

Note: If your patients experience any serious discomfort or pain,
stop immediately and have them take several deep breaths before
continuing the exercise session. Reduce or increase the number
of swings depending upon your patients’ physical condition and
on how they tell you they feel when they finish this exercise. You
and your patients should set the pace based on what you observe
and what they tell you after a few repetitions.

TouChinG toeS, BendinG BaCkWard

Benefits: This exercise will stretch the back muscles, drawing
the qi into the entire upper body. The bending and arching
movements stimulate the kidneys and stretch the hamstrings
and calves. Because your patients are seated for these movements,
some adaptation of the original is necessary. I leave it to you
to determine exactly how to modify this exercise based on the
physical condition of each of your patients.

Check your posture again to be sure you haven’t moved out
of position.

Begin by inhaling deeply in through your nose (as you bend
forward, start exhaling so that you will have blown out all
your breath before you return to your starting position).

Rounding your back slightly, bend forward over your thighs,

sliding your hands down the outside of your legs until you
touch your toes. At the same time, pull your toes back
so that you are resting on your heels. Pulling your toes
back will stretch and lengthen the muscles in your calves.

Return to the upright position, keeping your back slightly
rounded so that you move upward vertebra by vertebra
and breathe in as you are doing so.

Once your back is straight, arch away from the back of the
chair. Lean back as far as possible, allowing your head to
tip backwards at the same time and breathe out.

Note: If your patients have had a neck injury or back or neck
surgery, be cautious in introducing them to this particular exercise.

This excerpt was taken from the new book, Seated Taiji and
Qigong: Guided Therapeutic Exercises to Manage Stress and
Balance Mind, Body and Spirit by Cynthia W. Quarta, (c) 2012
Singing Dragon. As a special service to Empty Vessel readers,
Singing Dragon is offering a 20% discount on this book. To
receive the discount, visit the Singing Dragon website (www.
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ing checkout.

Cynthia W. Quarta has taught martial arts for over 25 years
and was the activities director at an assisted living facility.
She continues to teach seated Taiji classes in a number of
locations to a range of ages and levels of physical fitness.
These include classes for older people, people with physical
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with profound intellectual disabilities at a local mental health
center. She lives in Great Falls, Montana.
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Reviews

Tai Chi for a healthy body, mind and spirit.
The Ni Family Tai Chi Tradition
by Hua-Ching Ni and Maoshing Ni with Joseph Miller, Ph.D
Tao of Wellness Press
Softcover, 234 pages  $19.95

Viewing Tai Chi movement as a form of ancient Taoist cosmology, a “dance of the cosmos,” the Ni family has compiled their writings on Tai Chi from their past publications into this volume. The book contains new material and photos as well.

Parts 1-3 of the book will be of great value to all Tai Chi students and teachers. Although the Ni family has their own forms, the material in these pages gives guidance for any approach to Tai Chi, whether it is for health or cultivation, regardless of one’s form or style. There is scientific research for those interested, as well as a wealth of practical guidelines, but the value of this book is in its guidance for Tai Chi as self-cultivation. There is a theme throughout the book of moving away from the martial quality of Tai Chi and towards the refinement of one’s energy. Particularly inspiring is the discussion of the Universal Energy Net and Energy Organization in the Body in Chapter 8. The principles beautifully described in Chapters 1-12 can add depth and guidance to one’s practice and could be easily adapted as supplementary material in a teaching environment. There is a chapter on Spiritual Swordsmanship, emphasizing the sword as a metaphor for cultivating and refining the spirit.

Part 4 is more for those wanting to learn the Ni family forms or those who already know them. There is a lengthy description, photo by photo, for those wanting to start with the 18 step and 28 Step Harmony Tai Chi forms. Included is a discussion of the Harmony Long Form. A unique aspect of this form is the use of the spiritual names along with the common names of each individual posture. The spiritual names come from the Tao Teh Ching. Thus a movement such as “Repulse the Monkey” becomes “To Progress in Tao Seems Like Regressing”. This becomes a valuable study tool for those wishing an experiential approach to studying the Tao Teh Ching and facilitates the internalization of Lao Tzu’s teaching. Discovering the meaning of the phrase within the movement is a lifelong process that goes beyond book study.

Part 4 also includes a brief discussion of the other Ni family forms. Although not taught publicly but available for viewing on DVD from www.taostar.com, Gentle Path, Sky Journey, and Infinite Expansion are presented here with a list of their own unique posture names. Each of these forms correlates with the development and refinement of each Tan Tien, something not many Westerners have access to in a Tai Chi form.

The value of this book is in the emphasis on spiritual development. This has been the authors’ life work and teaching. For students of Tao, Hua-Ching Ni, Dr. Mao, and Dr. Miller have given us a resource that with daily practice and study helps us “to go beyond the form.”

Peter Stege, D.O.M. lives in Northern New Mexico and is a certified teacher in Harmony Tai Chi.

Seated Taiji and Qigong:
Guided Therapeutic Exercises
to Manage Stress and Balance Mind, Body and Spirit
by Cynthia W. Quarta
Singing Dragon
Softcover, 204 pages, $24.95

This book is the first one that I am aware of, at least, that teaches these important and oh so helpful practices from a seated position. There are many people who, because of various infirmities, cannot do the standing practices but there is really lots that can be done from a chair. (See excerpt from this book in this issue.)

I remember years ago when I had a student in a qigong class of mine who was confined to a wheelchair. The form we were doing had us bending forward down to the floor and he was a little nervous about bending too far over and falling out of his chair! But, on the second day he came in with a seat belt contraption he has fashioned and could bend forward and still feel secure. Actually, not long after that he called me and told me that he had been so inspired by the practice that he had decided to go to school to study Chinese medicine!

This book has tons of exercises that one can do from a chair, with lots of photos. Purists may argue that this is not real taiji if you are not moving your body from the floor up but I feel that one needs to work with what one
has and if one is confined to a chair that work with that. Yu don’t need to be able to stand to move qi.

As a matter of fact, you don’t even need to be able to move to move qi! Years ago I was bringing my first qigong teacher to Eugene to lead classes and we had a student come who was recuperating from cancer. She was on oxygen and could not stand for long periods and so was able to join the class. But my teacher gave the woman a video of her doing the form and told her to lie down and just watch it and feel how it moved her energy.

The next time my teacher was in town the woman came back, totally off the oxygen and able to not only stand but move through the form! (After one has done a taiji or qigong practice for some time one can experience qi flow just by doing the form in your mind.)

So I am happy to see this very valuable book come out. If you are in a chair yourself or know someone who is interested in qi practice who is confined to a chair get them this book!

This book is about how to build a strong foundation in your taiji practice. Without a strong foundation, no matter what your practice is, it will not succeed. The Chinese author is a well-known Chen master and his co-writer has been his student for many years. Together they offer guidance on the path of mastery, no matter what style of taiji you practice.

I especially like the passage on the back cover by Master Chen.

Taijiquan is a teaching of the Dao. The Dao is not far from man, but it is man who distances himself from the Dao. The Great Dao is without a gate. If you pursue it with insistence and perseverance and if you enter the depth step by step, you will finally reach it and enter it, just like fire ascending from water, just like a flower blossoming amidst the snow. Hence he who has the determination is indeed going to complete the task.

Taking the student through the five levels of mastery, must guidance is given on building a strong and solid foundation so that as your practice evolves over the years you will be building on firm ground. Regardless of the style you practice, including qigong forms, you can apply the teachings here to good measure.

I enjoyed the fact that the original Chinese of the master is included. The translations, by his German student, a taiji master in his own right, are clear and to the point. He also includes much supplementary material, to make the teachings more easily understandable.

Another valuable contribution from the folks at Sing Dragon Press, who are becoming an important source of excellent material on the healing arts.
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<tr>
<td>Health Pack (700 High Performance, 180 Five Elements, Ancient Treasures Tea, Regenerating Cream)</td>
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<td>Five Elements: concentrated formula (180 caps)</td>
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<td>High Performance (700 tabs)</td>
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<td>Ancient Treasures Tea</td>
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Elixirs

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<tr>
<td>Calming/Sleeping</td>
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<td>Internal Cleanse (liver/toxin clearing)</td>
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