

**SPIRIT THROUGH BODY:
PURSUING A SPIRITUAL PATH THROUGH T'AI CHI**

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I want to thank Bob Billstrom for giving me this opportunity to speak about something that's been at the center of my life for the last 39 years—pursuing a spiritual path through T'ai Chi.

One of my students told me this story: He took a solo hike on his favorite trail, which led through a forest to a bluff overlooking the ocean—Elk Head in Trinidad. He stopped there and practiced a long, traditional T'ai Chi sequence. As his hands drifted downward to conclude, tears fell onto his T-shirt in big, heavy drops—“like rain,” he said. Then he heard a voice: “It's okay, you belong here.” Did it come from inside or outside his head? He couldn't tell. While he related this story, he kept interrupting himself to impress on me what a practical man he was—as a physician he saw human disease and suffering every day and did not consider himself a spiritual person. Yet at that moment he felt not only embraced by the universe, but “blessed,” as he put it. The sensation was unique—he was used to being liked and respected by grateful patients, but this went beyond that. The impulse to say thank you welled up in him. He had experienced a moment of grace, the “peace that passeth all understanding.” “It's okay, you belong here.”

Belonging. Being inextricably connected—to *ourselves*, to each other, and to all of nature—the interdependent web of existence. That's what Taoism, out of which T'ai Chi evolved, is about—harmonizing with nature, beginning with our *own* nature.

When I practice T'ai Chi (always outside), I become *porous* and better able to absorb the beauty around me. I also release my own energy into the atmosphere. I inhale and exhale with every pore of my body. Qi—the life force—washes through me unimpeded. This cleansing and replenishing with pristine energy brings clarity. My surroundings become more three dimensional; colors become startlingly vivid and alive. My inward vision is

sharper too. I see myself; I become wise to myself. Over the years, inner and outer selves gradually come into harmony so that I'm increasingly authentic, and feel more and more as if I belong in my own skin. Bit by bit, day by day, T'ai Chi gently works to dissolve the barriers within myself and between me and the universal life force.

If we nourish, harmonize, and unify all our parts—body, mind, spirit, and emotions—we automatically, spontaneously become one with the universe because we *mirror* the universe, which is, essentially, unity.

The slow motion of T'ai Chi is critical. The slower the better. There are some T'ai Chi practices when my movement slows so much that I wonder if it will stop altogether. Every particle of my being is fully charged. A feeling of suspension and, at the same time, incredible speed overtake me. I've come up with two possible ways of putting this into words—and they seem to be exact opposites. One is that I feel as if I'm being suctioned out of my familiar space and time and flung into something else, my particles dispersed into a borderless existence that doesn't *know* space or time. Another is that a gate opens and a fantastic raw energy gushes into my small dot of a being and obliterates me. Either way I vanish into total yang (outward exploding) and total yin (inward imploding) all at once. This is the essence of belonging: loss of the separate self, being inseparable from the universe.

The “door” to this state may open and close repeatedly during the sequence. I feel rubbery moving in and out of it. It's an experience beyond words. Not just beyond words, beyond thought. It *is* possible to stop thinking. When I lose my “self,” there is no longer subject and object, me and not-me, movement and stillness. The thrilling feeling comes afterward when I return and realize I've been away. I watch for and welcome this phenomenon. It always comes uninvited and unannounced. All I can do is make myself available.

Of course this experience—the astonishing merging of yin and yang—radically alters how I perceive the concerns of day-to-day life. It's consoling and calming to know that I and my niggling struggles and even the world and its planet-threatening challenges are a piece of something bigger on an entirely different scale.

In the *Tao Te Ching*, Laotse tells me the Tao's inexhaustible energy is impartial and doesn't care if I succeed in my endeavors or not. But I have "seen" it and I have a way into it, and can draw on it to sustain me in my material existence. It does not withhold itself.

This is how I got into T'ai Chi: In 1979, I was diagnosed with a precancerous condition. Doctors were recommending surgery, but I had a very strong intuition not to go there. Instead, I embarked on a natural healing program, using the shotgun method—herbs, supplements, diet changes, colors, and meditation.

I was such an active person, that I didn't think I'd be able to be still long enough for sitting meditation, so I enrolled in a T'ai Chi class taught by Kao Ching-hua, a woman who had learned Wu Style as a girl in pre-Revolutionary China—also as part of healing program. In her case, for a heart condition. T'ai Chi was love at first sight for me. From the beginning, I practiced twice a day and it became my moving meditation.

I also stuck my toe into sitting meditation and was surprised at how readily all the rest of me dove in. Both forms of meditation (and most of the other healing methods I used) have been a daily part of my life for the last 39 years.

Three years into the healing program, my tests had returned to normal.

It was obvious to me that a lot more than my physical health was affected. I was a potter at the time, and my work in clay improved immensely for many reasons. I slowed down. I became more observant and thus more aware of what each piece needed to make it technically and aesthetically complete. My concentration intensified so that I was more likely to "lose myself" in my work, be less self-conscious and more committed to simply making a piece succeed, giving it whatever time and inventiveness it took. I developed a more positive attitude and more resilience—both necessities for a person working with a medium that's very breakable and subjected to an

imperfectly predictable trial by fire. Often the graceful currents stimulated within me by the circuitous movements of T'ai Chi surfaced in my clay and glazes.

By enhancing my being, T'ai Chi enhances everything I do.

We live in a world that emphasizes mind at the expense of body, spirit, and emotions. And I know that many—probably most of you—have ways to counteract that. Spending time in nature—gardening, walking, backpacking, biking, paddling. Playing music. Doing Yoga, T'ai Chi, or qigong. In all these things, the body is the crucial element. It's a doorway to spiritual growth and health.

Our society is beginning to expand to see humans more holistically. Instead of only recognizing the brain housed in the cranium, neuroscientists now recognize three brains in the body, three places where there is an extraordinarily dense gathering of neurons—in the head, around the heart, and in the abdomen. (All three are connected by the vagus nerve, the longest nerve of the autonomic nervous system, running from the brain stem to the intestines.)

For millennia, Taoists have been aware of the same three critically important energy centers, which they call *dan tians*. When Taoists refer to *the dan tian*, they mean the one in the abdomen. This is the body's main qi reservoir and qi pump. "Dan" means red and "tian" means field or area. Kao Ching-hua told me it's called "field of red" because at any given time, about twenty-five percent of the blood in the body is concentrated there.

This dan tian is my umbilical cord to the universe, through which I have access to everything. Energy courses into the dan tian from the earth and sky and is then pumped out to the furthest reaches of my body, augmented and directed by breath, intention, and movement.

I use the dan tian not just while doing T'ai Chi or meditating, but throughout my day. I draw on it in encounters with people and while kayaking, swimming, hiking, writing, and painting. But even as a kid I was aware that my impulses and reactions originated not in my head but in my belly and

traveled upward to my heart where I felt them and to my brain where I put them into thoughts and words. I have always regarded what I eventually came to know as the dan tian as the source of my intuition or “gut feelings,” the home of my subconscious, and the well from which my dreams spring. When I practice T’ai Chi in the mornings, my intensified connection with the dan tian brings back last night’s dreams—dreams I wasn’t able to recall with conscious effort on waking.

I experience this lower dan tian as the conductor of the orchestra. It gathers all my resources—physical, mental, and spiritual—and pulls in qi and resources from beyond myself to bring me into heightened wholeness and acuity.

I first proved this to myself in 1984 while skiing Mt. Bachelor. I had no business being at the top of that mountain. Wind had whipped the snow into Dairy Queen swirls that—up there—looked sinister. The way down was shockingly steep; there were no trees to hang onto; and I was a mediocre skier. I had only one hope—plug into the dan tian and trust it to give me the wherewithal to make it to the bottom in one piece. Five years of T’ai Chi training had at least begun to teach me what the dan tian was capable of. So instead of giving my attention to the parts of me that appear to do the skiing—my arms and legs—I focused *inward* on the dan tian. Outside of practicing T’ai Chi or meditating, this was the first time I deliberately drew on that place in the center of my abdomen. I stayed in my dan tian the whole way down the mountain. My limbs performed with strength and coordination far beyond my normal skill. I made it without falling.

The Taoist concept of dan tian has a kindred spirit in the Japanese concept of *hara*, which translates literally as “belly.” A person with *hara* has the capacity to open herself to the seminal life force and manifest it with increasing faithfulness over a lifetime. Like the dan tian, the *hara* resides at the center of gravity in the middle of the abdomen.

As I get quiet during T’ai Chi, there’s a natural sinking and settling into the abdomen, into the dan tian. I feel like I’m coming home. Emotions that I’ve been holding in that area (suppressing or repressing, stuffing them down in order to avoid) have to leave. They’re displaced—my essential self is there now. As the prickly emotions drift upward, they pierce heart and head. Conscious and subconscious mingle and get to know each other. The

process may bring tears or smiles. It's often an unpleasant stage, but it doesn't last. It all keeps going, vaporizing through the crown of my head.

Eventually I become empty, occupying a place that I call "nowhere"—I think of it as "going nowhere." Yet at the moment of arrival, I erupt into everywhere. When I practice T'ai Chi overlooking Crater Lake, I can easily contain within my dan tian all that water, all that blue, the rocks of the caldera, and the trees clinging to its edges. Finally what's in that place is an unassailable clarity and peace.

My almost forty-year-long practice of T'ai Chi and meditation doesn't mean I never get knocked off balance, but it helps me regain my balance more quickly. It also seems to be supplying me with a growing underlying solidarity that's even there when I'm feeling extremely anxious, vulnerable, and shaky. It's outside my consciousness, but I witness its *effect* on my life.

I try to live every day with one foot in the Tao. I am, on one level, a physical body operating in a material world full of necessary and unnecessary distractions. If I allowed them to, they would consume me. In addition to being unbalanced, that life would be shallow and unfulfilling. *But I do not revere the material world any less than I do the immaterial world.* The life of my body on Earth is the precious medium I work with to realize my identity with the Tao, the interdependent web of all existence. Living in an ongoing awareness and blend of both worlds—feeling at home there—is my aspiration and my definition of enlightenment.

It's okay. We belong here.

I'm going to demonstrate Chen style—the first style of T'ai Chi to be developed, and the closest to the martial art. It's a powerful fusion of yin and yang, feminine and masculine. It provides a sometimes explosive outlet for emotions that have been building in me as a response to current events in our country and on our planet right now. I get to express, release, break out. And it builds my strength, my determination, my qi.