

The Healing Power of Meditative Mind

Incense smoke coils about the twelve people sitting in meditation at the Mountain Wind Zen Meditation Center of Pittsburgh. The candles beside the statue of Shakyamuni Buddha flicker and sway as each person focuses upon the dantian—the center of the physical body and the vessel of “Chi” or energy of each person. The room pulses with vitality, and the intensity is palpable. To an outsider, these people deep in meditation (or Samadhi) might be seen as seeking some power beyond the here and now—whether it is called enlightenment, transcendence, or divinity. Yet people often do not realize that meditation seeks to tap the incredible potential to heal the body both psychologically and physically. In fact, these people are healing themselves through meditation.

The therapeutic benefits of meditation are gradually becoming more accepted in Western medicine and thought. Published medical studies have documented the extent to which meditation eases pain, bolsters the auto-immune system, decreases stress, improves mental health, and helps alleviate the symptoms associated with chronic pain, anxiety, depression, cancer, and heart disease. One meditation practitioner associated with CloudWater Zendo in Cleveland, of which Mountain Wind Zen Meditation is an affiliate, has even been able to cease taking psychotropic medication without any negative side effects. For these reasons, numerous hospitals have initiated meditation classes and therapies for patients since the benefits are so enormous.

Western culture is beginning to realize what has been known for thousands of years in China: meditation keeps the body and mind sound and it has the potential to treat a

wide range of ailments and diseases. More, American culture has been paying attention to the fact that body and mind share a vital connection, and any imbalance or weakness or either the mind or body causes an imbalance in the other. By training and restoring the balance of the mind, the body is healed as well.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (often referred to as TCM) is built upon the interconnectedness of body and mind. The foundation of the human body from a TCM perspective is comprised of Chi (or qi), the bio-electricity that surges through the cardiovascular and nervous system as well as through causeways called “meridians”; Jing, the essence of the body that is carried in DNA and manifests in all aspects of the human form—muscles, organs, bones, eye color, hereditary diseases, and the like; and Shen, the spirit latent in mind consciousness and awareness. These three elements—Chi, Jing, and Shen—comprise the essence of a human being, and when they are balanced, the person is healthy. When out of balance, those disharmonies can manifest in both the physical body and the mind. For example, alongside the psychological symptoms of depression, a person also develops physical symptoms such as lethargy, fatigue, joint and muscle pain, and other symptoms. To bring the mind back into harmony also revitalizes and mends the body.

As Dr. Yang, Jwing-Ming, a famous T'ai Chi and Chi Kung Master and one of my teachers, once remarked, the Western approach to illness is to treat the physical symptoms and not the root sickness, which may reside in the person's mental processes and emotional responses. It is vital to heal the mind—whether the issue is depression, stress, anger, grief, or other overwhelming emotions—in order to eradicate the residual traces or catalysts of an illness. Meditation trains the self to be more aware of those processes and responses and not to allow the seeds of potential sickness to germinate

and grow. Or, in response to an illness or disease already present, meditation addresses a malady by reintegrating the balance of body, mind, and spirit, thereby healing the whole self.

Despite the recognized and documented therapeutic potential of meditation, the idea of remaining in a stationary posture for a prolonged period of time is a daunting if not impossible task for many people, but there are other means to obtain these same benefits. T'ai Chi, the slow and gentle Chinese martial art, is also known as "Moving Meditation" since its graceful movements are coordinated with deep abdominal breathing and sustained awareness of body and breath. A knowledgeable and conscientious T'ai Chi teacher recognizes that in order to tap the immense health benefits of T'ai Chi, the mind must be trained in conjunction with the body to attain a state of meditative awareness. T'ai Chi and Chi Kung (or qigong, the therapeutic or medical side of T'ai Chi), are regarded as a vital branch of Traditional Chinese Medicine. For this reason, T'ai Chi should not be perceived as merely a dance or a slow version of Kung Fu, but, under the guidance of a competent and authentic teacher, T'ai Chi is a means to restore the balance of body and mind.

My approach to teaching T'ai Chi is heavily flavored by my experience as a Zen Monk and the Resident Instructor at the Mountain Wind Zen Meditation. Yet all T'ai Chi classes should stress the meditative and mind training aspects in order to remain faithful to T'ai Chi as it has been practiced and taught in Buddhist and Taoist monasteries in China for thousands of years. Remaining true to these roots maximizes the ability for T'ai Chi to rectify body and mind imbalances, cultivate spiritual awareness, and provide a means of strengthening the physical and psychological self.

Western Medical attitudes toward the therapeutic and medical benefits of T'ai Chi have been slowly changing in a more positive manner much like that of meditation, and many published medical studies document the extensive benefits of T'ai Chi. (For those who may be interested, an extensive published medical bibliography is included at <http://www.stillmountaintaichi.com/benefitsoftaichi.php>). My own experience over the last few years speaks to the shift in acceptance of T'ai Chi and meditation as healing practices. In the four years since moving to Pittsburgh and establishing a T'ai Chi School, Still Mountain T'ai Chi and Chi Kung, I have lectured on T'ai Chi and Traditional Chinese Medicine at Allegheny General Hospital and the University of Pittsburgh's School of Pharmacology, been invited to present on T'ai Chi and Chi Kung at the National Ovarian Cancer Symposium, have given workshops and seminars at MaGee-Women's Hospital, UPMC's Cancer Caring Center, the Dean Ornish Program at Allegheny General, Shepherd Wellness Center, Gilda's Club, the National Hemophilia Foundation, and the Mid-Atlantic Healing Weekend for persons with HIV/AIDS. And in the Fall of 2007, I will be conducting a research study with Brigid Coyne, Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Pittsburgh, on the measurable outcomes of using T'ai Chi as therapy for women with breast cancer. As T'ai Chi and meditation become more prominent and accepted in our culture, more people are discovering the healing benefits of these two thousand years old practices and turning to T'ai Chi and meditation as effective healing strategies that complement Western medical practices.

To provide others with access to meditation, T'ai Chi, and other branches of Traditional Chinese Medicine has long been a vital aspect of the Buddhist tenet of extending compassion to others. As a famous Buddhist mantra emphasizes:

May all beings be happy and have the causes of happiness.

May all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.

May all beings never be separated from the great joy beyond suffering.

May they always remain in the great equanimity beyond attachment and aversion.

T'ai Chi and meditation are paths to happiness, joy, and equanimity, and to guide others along those paths so that they can eradicate suffering and heal the body and mind is very important spiritual work. Matter of fact, to extend compassion to help another person to heal is to heal oneself as well. In this respect, the path of mindfulness and meditation is entwined with helping others revitalize the body and mind and discover the great joy that permeates all aspects of the world. To recover the joy of life is to heal oneself and the world in which we live, and in this respect, meditation is an extremely potent medicine.

Venerable Shih Tao-Fa (Dr. David Clippinger) is an ordained Ch'an (Zen) Monk and the Resident Instructor of Mountain Wind Zen Meditation in Mt. Lebanon, which meets every Wednesday evening at 7:00 PM. Sessions are free and open to all. He is also the Director of Still Mountain T'ai Chi and Chi Kung, LLC, where he teaches a wide range of T'ai Chi and medical and therapeutic Chi Kung. In addition, he runs a Corporate and Workplace Wellness program that delivers the benefits of T'ai Chi and Meditation to Businesses and Corporations. His book, *The Bliss of Now: Integrating Living, Working, Being*, is forthcoming. Ven. Shih Tao-Fa can be reached at 412-480-9177 or www.stillmountaintaichi.com.