

The Tao of Exercise and Self-Care

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*All beings, grass and trees, when alive, are soft and bending
When dead they are dry and brittle.
Therefore the hard and unyielding are companions of death,
The soft and yielding are companions of life.
Under heaven nothing is more soft and yielding than water.
Yet for attacking the solid and strong, nothing is better;
It has no equal.
The weak can overcome the strong;
The supple can overcome the stiff.
Lao Tzu*

There was once an efficiency expert who visited a chocolate factory and watched the women hand dipping chocolates. Their gestures always included various spirals and twirls in order to prevent drips as they lifted the chocolate from the vat to the paper.

Considering this a loss of time and efficiency, these women were taught to make a more direct in, out, over, down pathway. Within a week they were complaining of wrist pain (carpal tunnel symptoms). Having fallen out of interplay with their core creativity, the small, ingenious variations within each repetitive task were eliminated, and the women became more prone to fatigue and damage.

In the accelerated pace of our nanosecond world, if our goal is truly to be one with the nature of the Tao, we must be mindful to never lose the fluid, water-like language of the body. For in Taoism, the closest thing in nature to pure effectiveness is water. Water is the communicator, the informer and the transporter all in one.

The capacity to stay healthy and release stress while feeling and looking youthful is desired at every level of our society. As we seek the optimum in pursuit of health, we often understandably grab the most convenient workout option that promises definite results while causing the least intrusion into an already hectic schedule.

Strength-building machines have become a norm for accelerating results. Most 21st century workouts are at least semi-reliant upon them. A linear approach to

working and stretching isolated muscle groups is the status quo; it infuses our workouts, from physical therapy to dance classes and even to yoga.

Embracing a different view of the body, that is consistent with the ancient concept of the Tao, could revolutionize the process of staying fit and vital. In giving fresh perspective to our view of the human body, it is good to begin by remembering our ancient, biomorphic lineage. We have more in common with the earthworm than with any machine we interact with. The human organism is one of millions of life's experiments. We contain within our being the best of creative ideas and we share those ideas in variations with other species.

The spine first appeared in fish, perhaps as a means to store minerals in order to move from salt water to fresh. Our human spine has adapted to serve very different purposes, but still it has the ability to move like a fish. To recognize our 'species inclusive body' would immediately give access to new freedom of movement possibilities, allowing an adaptability that rarely gets touched past childhood.

Yet exploring our fluid capacities, which can involve moving in play more like an octopus or a snake, simply isn't current protocol in the gym atmosphere; nor is hanging at upside-down or sideways angles to gravity. Though enormously invigorating and strengthening, in adult public exercise venues these unusual positions and co-ordinations will definitely not be commonplace.

Most adult exercise is upright, organized around an up/down midline and primarily focused on forward thrust. This is so, even when we're not standing up, when we're swimming or lying on a mat. While a good thing for efficiency in daily life, continually repeated, this orientation limits an infinite number of possibilities for our well-being physically, emotionally and perceptually. And, health involves a balance of all three.

Within the current perspective, if one has the misfortune to have a "bad" hip, back, or any type of physical challenge, she/he is indoctrinated to believe that exercise is suddenly off limits or greatly curtailed. Since the body is movement, we always have the ability to move. Take note, if we look at the body's truth, the body is not designed for rigidity. However the movement patterns we practice tend to encourage rigidity. It is our "adult" tendency to segment between the limbs and torso that leads to excessive stabilization over time. "All beings...when alive are soft and bending, when dead are dry and brittle."

If our assumptions about old age are inaccurate, and fluid movement can be present throughout life, what else should we be examining? What facilitates regeneration and what contributes to the wearing out of parts? What is strength? What is the difference between brute force and the ability to sustain? Is it tone and muscle bulk that equals strength and does the lack of it denote weakness? Is the tone of a relaxed cat an equally desirable form of strength?

If we look at several mainstream assumptions underlying modern exercise theory, we discover that subtle as it may first appear, within its parameters, rigidity is predictable. Most approaches make a trade-off between strength and flexibility. The best results for creating muscle bulk seem to be produced by linear repetitive action and pushing a muscle's capacity past its limit. This creates micro tears in the tissue and it is this scarring over time that creates bulk. While this hard tone is much sought after, denser tissue, like any scar tissue, loses flexibility. Science is now finding that the lactic acid produced after this type of exercise is the body's attempt to dissolve hardening of the tissue. Why? Because the movement of nutrients, fluids and neural information requires sufficient suppleness in human tissue. It's not just that we're stiff, our passageways are impaired.

We seek suppleness by stretching our muscles. After asking them to shorten, we usually ask them to lengthen. Running back and forth between shortening and hardening tissue and then stretching and lengthening is a subtle contradiction for the body.

When targeting quads, hamstrings or specific muscle groups, lengthening occurs by positioning the body in such a way as to lever a specific muscle in two directions. If you were to take a rubber tube and pull it in two directions, it would lengthen and it would also narrow. If the force of these positions were increased enough, joints would tear apart. Vigorous stretching forces ligaments (whose job it is to hold joints together) to go into overdrive. Their fatigue is a threat to the joints.

We can begin to set ourselves free from the potential risk of this struggle and effort by shedding light on the little explored fact that our tissues have the ability to relax, open and lengthen of their own accord. This expansion is not so much the two way stretching of a rope, as it is more like loosening the strands of a braid in all directions. For this type of tissue opening to occur the body needs to be deeply relaxed while in movement.

Bringing the inner alertness of meditation and mindfulness to bear on free-flowing movement is what allows tissue to open of its own accord. This entails receiving and responding to the body's intelligence as it communicates through sensation.

That we can change the quality of our tissue by changing the context of our engagement is an extra-ordinary reality. Slowing down maximizes the exchange of information between cells. Just as one notices more details in nature when walking a path, rather than driving a car, sensation increases as movement slows.

If you sit on a log, the ant parade appears. Thus within the body, slowing down; slower than the pace of machines, slower than the pace of walking, allows another world of information to make itself known. This context seems to be the key to allowing the braid of the fibers of tissue to unravel and lengthen in their own way, and for nutrients to pass unencumbered.

The idea that speed benefits a workout is based on the assumption that velocity enhances cardio-vascular health and/or makes up for the stagnation of a sedentary lifestyle. What we often don't realize is that during fast repetitive movement a numbing dissociation occurs. Speed actually diminishes sensation. No longer are our senses enlisted to keep muscles and nerves attuned to subtler nuances of balance and harmony. Frequently we forget that speed and pushing through are designed for survival and single focused efficiency. Although we need those responses in an emergency, most of us have plenty of stress and speed in our daily lives. The bio-chemistry produced by speed and stress are not beneficial for our health as a steady norm.

We need to realize that our autonomic nervous system is regulated by the way we ingest breath. When our speed outstrips our nervous system's ability to handle the input, we switch from nose breathing to mouth breathing. In a regulated system the sympathetic and the parasympathetic branches of the autonomic nervous system are balanced. Neither is overpowering the other. Using the mouth for breathing triggers an escalation in our sympathetic nervous system's responses; in lay terms called the "fight or flight" response. Breathing tempos increase. This causes a shift in the body's physiology which triggers a cascade of internal events. The blood is diverted to the muscles and away from the organs, while the mind becomes highly alert. Digestion slows and the sphincter muscles in the bowel and bladder close. The blood thickens to increase clotting ability and to reduce bleeding in case of injury. Airways widen to let in more air and sweating increases to cool the body down. The liver releases sugar

to provide instant energy and muscles tense in readiness for action. Our immune response decreases to allow massive preparation for immediate threat.

Now, while these responses are part of the normal activity of the body for dealing with a short term situation, a long term activation of the sympathetic nervous system will cause it to become overworked leading to adrenal fatigue and a break down of the systems involved in preparing for the threat.

These can include a long-term decline of the immune system making one susceptible to colds, allergies and asthma. Constantly tight muscles will begin to show wear and tear not only within themselves but on the bones and joints that support them. Incessant tension can lead to chronic fatigue and fibromyalgia. Since the bowel and bladder are compromised in their function, chronic tension and system alert can result in poor digestion and elimination as well as long-term mal-absorption of nutrients. With the brain always on alert, it can be hard to get a good nights rest. Insomnia and restlessness result. The high demand of this type of activation can cause the heart rate to elevate. Should it become erratic or pound while at rest, anxiety tends to mount, perhaps leading to panic attacks. Smooth muscles of the organs remain tight which can increase blood pressure. And constant thickening of the blood set the body up for possible strokes. The list goes on to include forgetfulness, skin ailments, and chest pains that are not related to heart problems. In short, the body is being suffocated - isolated from life giving information and nutrients.

If mouth breathing becomes a chronic condition a tendency will develop for dry air passages, nose congestion, and a feeling of restriction and air hunger in the upper chest. The point is that pushing oneself in the name of cardio-vascular health may backfire without a pacing that allows the nervous system to stay balanced. In order to know that pace, we need to follow the cues of our breath, our nose breath.

Right above the mouth we have the nose, which is the preferred orifice for breathing. Even during extreme levels of effort the body can be trained to continue to use the nose for breathing. The nose, unlike the mouth, is able to filter, moisturize and warm the air and air passages. One of the balancing advantages of nose breathing is that the oxygen is delivered to all five lobes of the lungs. While we might feel as if we are taking in more oxygen with our mouths open, actually we are only using the top two lobes for breathing. A good deal of our capacity to take in more air is dependent upon a flexibility of the diaphragm and rib basket. A relaxed respiratory process that is fostered by breathing through the nose has a better chance of increasing chest mobility.

The biggest problem in developing a habit of mouth breathing is that our respiratory gases become unbalanced and oxygen delivery becomes compromised. The two main gas components of respiration are oxygen and carbon dioxide. Unfortunately, carbon dioxide has been misnamed as a waste gas so we think of it as something to rid ourselves of. The truth is that we need a certain amount of CO_2 to keep our body healthy. It makes logical sense that this would be true, the body always has to have balance. At the most basic level the CO_2 that our body produces is a by-product of cellular respiration occurring in the mitochondria of our cells and necessary for keeping our blood pH normal. This in turn regulates the release of oxygen from the hemoglobin in the red blood cells in order to feed the rest of the cells of the body. There is not enough CO_2 in our atmosphere to accomplish this, we must make our own and retain it for proper respiratory functioning.

If we have a habit of mouth breathing or of over breathing (breathing too fast for our body's needs) then we give off too much CO_2 . This imbalance of our respiratory gases results in a decrease in the efficiency of oxygen delivery to the cells. Since the production of energy in our body in the form of ATP is a metabolism (at the simplest level) of oxygen and sugar, when there is a decrease in the flow of oxygen then there is a decrease in the amount of energy produced by our cells; hence fatigue and the breakdown of other systems. As a result it can take longer to recover from exercise. Recovery means that breathe and heart rate can return to normal and we can "rest and settle" within seconds or minutes.

The feeling that you must open your mouth in order to get enough air is a clear sign that you are moving faster than your body's ability to maintain internal balance. This is ok on a short-term basis but not as a long term, everyday habit. In other words, you are moving too fast for your body to catch up in a healthy way. While discipline and will are excellent traits, if they override the natural rhythms of our body, we are in trouble.

After an exertion that involves pushing the limit, fatigue or lassitude ensue. As Lao Tzu, the father of Taoism, said, "Force is followed by loss of strength." In the intensity of our lives, many of us welcome the release of tension that occurs with this fatigue phase. But are our bodies being nourished or worn-out? Is the chosen method counter-productive?

With machines, even at a slower pace, the mechanical rhythm of a stair master, treadmill or other apparatus creates movement without organic variation.

Entropy, a slide into wearing down, is the only option for a machine. When we follow the lead of a machine, our parts have a greater possibility of wearing out as well. Set routines lack creative variations. The women of the chocolate factory were naturally creative in their motions - they intuitively trusted their inner wisdom.

It's easy to mistakenly assume that all bodies have the same needs and even that one's body has the same needs day to day. When experimentation is traded for constant certitude, the body loses its ability to nurture the immediate. Our bodies need change. Without it we become rigid and bored. Like the rhythm of a metronome, a machine is constant and inorganic. The bio-circuitry of our system is ever so different, slower and varied.

Our bodies seek attunement with the rhythms of the biosphere in order to heal and regenerate. We are so much more than static entities to endlessly be run through the same routine, in the hopes that we will not slide into decrepitude while we aren't looking.

The inner listening that adds up to kinesthetic intelligence, intuition or personal wisdom is such an important life skill. Courting wellbeing by surrendering to the pace of the creative intelligence of the body is at the heart of the most advanced ancient and ageless health philosophies. At this time, in our culture, we could use some remembering and reminding.

THE DANCE OF THE NATURE OF WATER

Can we slow down enough to ask just what is the 'dance of the nature of water' and its impact in terms of exercise, physical strength and toning? When we think of the water element in movement terms, we think of a fluid quality of smooth, effortless motion. It is the description of grace.

In the Tao of well-being, practicing the nature of water may not only lead to a less strained and fatiguing form of exercise, it also may be the key to the kind of deep cellular health and strength that persists into old age. Infinitely adaptable to all manner of circumstances, water sees no duality between strong and supple.

Every culture has a form of dance expression. Dance is a sensuous enjoyment of movement and music. We can not assume that movement without pleasure adds up to the same life force enhancement. Just as stress creates an internal bio-chemistry, pleasure creates a very different body chemistry. Our cultural

tendency is to derive pleasure from achieving goals, making progress, and getting things done. But the power of sensual pleasure as a nutrient for vitality and regeneration has not been adequately explored. All manner of poor self-image, neurosis, and personal discomfort can be ameliorated simply by feeling good inside. Conversely, the more we live apart from our own physical experience, the more prone we are to anxiety, cravings, and someone else's authority.

Creativity in movement explorations assures presence with the moment. Exploration without set expectations requires experiencing the moment. This fluid state of being brings us home to our bodies.

Aspects of this fluid state of body/mind are often exquisitely captured by professional athletes who learn to trust their bodies. Referred to as "being in the zone"; the body intuitively knows where to go of its own accord in seemingly effortless, effective action.

Mastery in sports requires presence, spontaneity, fluidity, trust, a willingness to be present with the unknown right now. Contained dignity is never called for. Unpredictability is the norm. Seeing the power of the water principle in sports, a form of self-care fitness that incorporates these attributes becomes highly attractive.

CONTINUUM

Revolutionary on the fitness scale, Continuum takes the healing power of movement to a higher octave. Continuum is a call to life that honors the language of the body: one with source, that language is creative. The human body and spirit are designed for the creative act of regeneration. This does not require invention. The cells of the body already know.

In Continuum, people find a safe space of surrender that allows the intelligence that goes beyond thought to be received. Embodying the water principle, Continuum explores the harmonies between human beings, movement, and the Tao. This truly can regenerate vitality without depletion.

Imagine an organism relaxed, in spontaneous play. Minute sensations spread and amplify as we attend to them. Wave motions bring the body away from a segmented awareness. At times the body suspends with a sense of lightness that seems to defy gravity. The whole organism begins to move as one coordinated

whole. This is the context that allows tissue to open of its own accord, restoring suppleness.

For the participant, the sensation is to be on the cusp of BECOMING without a goal of arriving or staying. The next impulse can arrive from any vector or angle of the body taking it again as a whole into a new configuration. It is hard to describe the pleasure of these slow transformations in which the dissolving of one form is the same as the creation of another. It is a deep peace of being exactly in the moment and richly informed without a need to know what comes next or what it all means.

We often associate this sense of stillness with meditation, the polar opposite of action. For this state to emerge, the directing, goal driven mind must take the back seat. Because the neo-cortex is not directing the process of this movement, there is a sense of participating in the unfolding of a mystery. Within incremental movements, cells of our body are awakened to a relationship of oneness with the quantum field. Honoring the wisdom of the body's cellular intelligence, we reawaken humanity's link to the ancient dance of life.

It is after one of these explorations that one often recognizes the wisdom of the choices that are made by the organism when it is freed from linear, problem solving modes of assessing. Without having any destination, the body seems to know exactly how it needs to go in order to open more space and volume and to release tensions. Given half a chance, it will re-balance at a higher level of order. This becomes evident as one notices an increase of circulation, more relaxation, pleasurable sensations, and an opening of breath. Usually one feels invigorated, refreshed, and freer.

Surprisingly, Continuum brings together the super athlete, the dancer, and the physically impaired. This is particularly meaningful for someone who has lost the ability to pursue a beloved activity. Once again, a duality crumbles. It turns out that level of fitness has nothing to do with one's ability to participate with movement in a creative and enlivening fashion. Organic explorations which follow natural impulses take the body into a plentitude of varied relationships with gravity, far from our usual center line equilibrium. Since many injuries, such as sprains and tears, occur with sudden divergences from the mid-line, the ability to holistically co-ordinate and sustain in unusual positions that are far from equilibrium is a key to building both strength and adaptability.

Even for those who recognize the realm just described, it is a leap to imagine that this form would ever produce strength. Of course, it could never replace the training required to run a marathon, or any other specialized performance, for that matter. Specific skills need practice. But then, the Tao of self-care is just as crucial. Renewal after specialized or extreme activities is essential for the longevity of our capacities. To refresh the world of possibilities after any repetitive use will restore balance to the whole.

Sound has been used in many meditations over the centuries because it is one of the fastest ways to enrich an inner state of dynamic relaxation. Thus, in Continuum, sound is employed as another form of movement. It helps us to feel from the inside out as a sort of bio-feedback to the system. We can feel the vibration of sound as it literally communicates through bone and tissue. When we become interested in the sensations and movement of sound, it has a way of organically opening and slowing breathing. As it goes with breath, so it goes with the nervous system.

WU WEI - WHERE MOVEMENT AND NON-MOVEMENT MEET

In Taoism, the term 'wu wei' sums up the context of engagement being discussed. Also referred to as 'the action of non-action.' Huston Smith, author of *The World Religions*, calls wu wei, "pure effectiveness" or "creative quietude".

"Creative quietude combines within a single individual two seemingly incompatible conditions - supreme activity and supreme relaxation. The seeming incompatibles can coexist because human beings are not self-enclosed entities. They ride an unbounded sea of Tao that sustains them, as we would say, through their subliminal minds...

One way to create is through following the calculated directives of the conscious mind. The results of this mode of action, however, are seldom impressive; they tend to smack more of sorting and arranging than of inspiration.

Genuine creation, as every artist knows, comes when the more abundant resources of the subliminal self are somehow taped. But for this to happen a certain disassociation from the surface self is needed. The conscious mind must relax, stop standing in its own light, let go. Only so is it possible to break through the law of reversed effort in which the more we try the more our efforts boomerang."

This is the inner context that changes everything. It requires a state change from our everyday action mode in which we are getting things done to what Aldous Huxley called, "dynamic relaxation." When this state is courted during moving explorations, the body seems to guide while the mind appreciates the unfolding. Pleasurable movement could be seen as a nutrient that is vital for our organism's harmony. Again, to quote Smith; "Infinitely supple, yet incomparably strong - these virtues of water are precisely those of wu wei as well. The person who embodies this condition...acts without strain."

When our bodies need energy, whether it's physical or emotional, a workout that enhances awareness and sensation, is what inspires. Aligned with the same principles that revitalize water when it can flow freely, it can access spontaneity, freedom, and an agility that is completely unexpected. Self-care and healing are most effective when in harmony and resonance with the bio-sphere.