

The concept of preventive
medicine is ancient
**Chinese Medicine:
A Health Lifestyle**

**China: A Visit
to the Birthplace
of T'ai Chi**

It Is About
The Way Things Are
Taoism

NIH study performed at
Emory University:
**Using T'ai Chi To
Prevent Falls In
Senior Citizens**



Volume 6, Number 1
Spring 1996
\$5.00





CHINA

A VISIT TO THE BIRTHPLACE OF T'AI CHI

Having studied T'ai Chi for eleven years, it was always a wish of mine that I would some day have the opportunity to visit China, the source of this multi-faceted art. This dream became a reality last summer when I boarded a jumbo jet bound for Beijing at the start of my twelve day holiday.

At the end of the seventeen hour flight, we arrived in an airport terminal that was reminiscent of some B-grade, James Bond-type film from the early sixties. The high-tech design, gleaming glass, and metal that we have come to associate with international airports today were conspicuously absent. Everything seemed colored by a sepia, yellowing tinge, the result of decades of smokers allowing the lingering mist of their cheap cigarettes to cling to anything standing still for more than five minutes.

Once we were ensconced in our clean and comfortable hotel, we set off on our introductory tour

of Beijing. Walking along streets was somewhat like leaving a rock concert. Everywhere we went, we were swept along in a tide of thousands. The first port of call was Tiananmen Square, ironically named "Gate of Heavenly Peace." This was the scene of the student demonstrations of 1989 when the authorities turned their guns on the protesters. No one really knows how many were killed, injured, or tortured as a result of those fateful days, but there was certainly no sign of turmoil on this hot July day. The huge, slabbed square was throbbing with throngs of tourists from all parts of China, visiting their capital and seat of government.

Despite the buzzing energy of the Beijing masses, we encountered none of the frenetic pushing or shoving that one would expect to see in a place like New York, which has a similar population but an entirely different culture. The people of Beijing appeared carefree and un-



Ritan Park, in Beijing, China, is filled with physical activities in the early mornings.

PHOTOS BY RONNIE ROBINSON

hurried. The bicycle lanes were like snakes that slipped and slithered their way along predetermined tracks. When endeavoring to cross the road through the traffic, we spent some time waiting for a break in the flow, which never came. Trying to pick our way through the continuous stream of bikes was unnerving, until we finally figured out how the locals do it. No hesitating, watching, or waiting for them—if they wanted to cross the road, they did just that! We found that we had to move ahead almost without thought, the bikes and the cyclists were unfazed by us. If we continued moving, they did too. Only when we hesitated did any difficulty arise. Any stopping and uncertainty caused problems to the cyclists, who seem extremely adept at flowing around a moving pedestrian. However, they cannot cope with paranoid Westerners who pause and shuffle their way delicately forward.

Everybody in Beijing “goes with the flow.” The

most memorable instance of this occurred as we watched our tour bus make a right turn clear through the twenty-foot-wide worm that was the bike lane. As the bus progressed steadily on its way, the hordes of cyclists continued moving and winding their way around the impending obstacle like ants negotiating a stick in their path. This was pure T'ai Chi in motion—yielding and absorbing, allowing the oncoming energy to take its path while one continues unaffected on one's way. (I would like to see the result of a bus trying that one in Glasgow or New York! I'm sure a few tempers would have flared!)

The next morning I arose early and made my way to the local park to see T'ai Chi in action. On the fifteen minute walk to Ritan Park, we passed the various embassies of the many countries represented in China.

Ritan Park itself initially appeared very bare. The tree-lined park had no grassy area, due to the



"I had often read & heard of this quality...but this was the first time I had really experienced it."

repeated stepping of the many T'ai Chi practitioners. As well as many different forms of T'ai Chi, we saw people of all ages doing Chi Kung, aerobics, and even ballroom dancing! In the more open spaces, groups of about twenty people were practicing the "Simplified Peking Form." The park benches held a collection of handbags that the women had left while they engaged in their morning exercise routine. In almost any other major city, these items would have been snatched by some opportunistic thief. In Beijing, it seemed, people respected each other and had no desire to avail themselves of someone else's possessions.

I found a quiet spot under the trees and proceeded to go through my form. As I turned from one movement to another, a group of women gathered to observe this Westerner practicing their Eastern art. They flashed me smiles of encouragement and pleasure upon seeing their daily routine adopted by someone from a far-off land. As I neared completion of my short form, a man came forward and motioned me towards him with a bow of his head. I finished off my form and bowed in return. He then signaled for me to demonstrate my version of "single whip." I had seen many interpretations of this movement, and my version carried some embellishments which I believed added something to the original. I sheepishly performed the movement for him and he, in turn, demonstrated his version, with an emphasis on turning the waist and returning with a "whip-like" action. I asked him to repeat the move and then

tried to emulate his style. He showed me again and mimicked my version. This continued for about ten minutes. The man obviously knew his stuff, so I asked if he pushed hands. He gave me a curious look and then offered me his two arms. I took up position and made contact with his upper limbs. He started to move, but I had difficulty following his pattern. He then offered one arm, and I again made contact. We moved together, and I stayed with him for a short while. He then moved towards my center with his hands, and I could feel that at any minute he would push me over. He didn't. We were both well aware of his superiority, but he showed no desire to prove it. Working with this man was like trying to push through water. His form was extremely smooth and fluid, and it felt like nothing was there when I tried to push towards him. He came towards me just enough to know that there was no need to go any further. No loss, no gain, no ego. Just there. During my years of practice, I had often read and heard of this quality when pushing hands, but this was the first time I had really experienced it. When we reached this stage, the man stopped and nodded to signify our short session was over. I nodded to thank him. A man of around age seventy then appeared, and my "teacher" began to work with him. We watched them for about twenty minutes while they worked on various points of the form before finishing off by executing an equally impressive sword form. We felt privileged to be a part of all this.

We then walked around Ritan Park, which was alive with hundreds of people involved in their morning exercises. The strains of dance music drew us nearer to a circular, walled area. When we turned in, we were greeted by the most incredible sight—approximately 100 dancers waltzing in unison to the distorted noise emanating from an old, battered ghetto-blasters! Young women danced with old men, old women with young men, young with young, and old with old. Even small kids were a part of this early morning jamboree. The happiness and joy on their faces was infectious. Some were learning, some were playing, and a few danced impeccably as they glided through the park like Oriental versions of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, with an amazing smoothness and poetry in their motions!

Looking around nearby, I spotted a young girl, maybe seven years old, practicing Kung Fu move-

ments while her mother looked on. We went closer to see this child execute her movements with the determination of someone going for a black belt. She moved up, down, and around with perfect alignment and precision, holding us spell-bound in awe with her prowess.

Back home at the hotel, I wanted to try a Chinese massage, so I booked a session with the resident masseur. He occupied a room on the first floor, and as I knocked on the door, I was greeted by the biggest Chinese man I have ever encountered. In a nation of small people, he was a giant of a man, towering over six feet in height. He gestured for me to remove my shirt and lie face down on the couch. He covered my body with a thin, white piece of muslin and placed his large hands on my back. As we had no common language, I was forced to communicate through grunts and gestures (nothing new here). Working through the cloth, he loosened up my spinal area and pressed his thumbs into my shoulder area. His method of working was very similar to Shiatsu, but his hands seemed to move much more quickly, adeptly and rapidly searching out the points of stress or tension. His thumbs and fingers

concentrated on the areas that most required them and helped to alleviate my lower back twinges. The session lasted half an hour and cost me £5. I tried to ask him some questions, such as whether he encountered different problems when working with Westerners than with Chinese clients. His English, however, was poor, and my Chinese was non-existent.

A few days later, I took an early morning cab ride to Jingshan Park. This park had been built of rock hewn from the soil during preparations made for erecting the Forbidden City. Towering high over the city, Jingshan Park was the embodiment of all the Chinese images I had seen in photographs and movies. At every turn of the path appeared another Zen-like garden, with rocks placed in strategic positions to create an oasis in the city. In a city with such a huge population, here was a place one could go to be alone, in one's own space. The foliage and painted pagodas concealed small gardens where one, two, or half a dozen people could sit and contemplate. In every corner, someone was practicing something in terms of movement. T'ai Chi for the masses, or the few, if you prefer. Huge gatherings



The park benches held a collection of handbags that the women had left while they engaged in their morning exercise.



Aerobics to music is a popular morning routine.

of all ages did aerobics to music, intimate groups stretched their legs on the high fences, and quiet individuals secluded by rocks flexed their wrists and hands. The park felt very special, and as I wandered around with my camera, I spied a man of around seventy standing close to a young woman. His one hand moved in and out towards her body while the other lay gently on her head. They stood beside some trees near a park bench, and he was focusing his energy through his hands towards her upper chest. He was obviously using Chi Kung for healing in the early morning park. I watched for a while, took some discreet photographs, and wandered on in the direction of a pagoda-covered area, where a small group of people performed some movements.

I felt like doing something, so I placed my camera equipment carefully on the ground and started to do "waving hands in clouds." This simple exercise is also a part of the Short Yang Form, which I could do without drawing too much

attention to myself. A few minutes into the exercise, a woman of around fifty appeared at my side. She watched for a while and gestured for me to adapt the exercise slightly to a style that she demonstrated. I duly complied and joined her in moving my arms and waist together. She soon realized that I had some experience of moving in this manner and hurried away, apparently in search of something. She returned with a man in his late fifties, who proceeded to guide me round the paved, pagoda-covered enclosure. Working with this man proved to be of interest not only to me but also provided some entertainment for the regular park visitors. A few minutes later, the crowd became somewhat animated, and a chorus of "Teacher!, Teacher!" rang out from a few voices. One of the group scurried away and returned with the gentleman whom I had earlier seen practicing Chi Kung on the young woman. He observed us for a while and then took over the role of teacher from my previous helper. He made more distinctive shapes with his arms and, ensuring I was forming a similar pattern, adjusted my position accordingly. Working with very low, stepping movements, he kept a careful eye on me to confirm I was still with him. From time to time, he would pull his palms closer together and then space them apart to signify the importance of the relationship between the hands. He wanted me to be aware of the energy flowing between my palms while I was moving with these low steps. I felt the connection, like a subtle, magnetic force between my hands. We spent about twenty to thirty minutes working together, as the locals looked on with great pride in their master and pleasure in a foreigner doing a fairly reasonable imitation of his movements.

During this time, my wife, who had been wandering close by with some friends, reached for my camera to take some photographs. This caused much consternation amongst my new found friends, who imagined a sneak thief was trying to make off with my bag. I had to reassure them that all was okay, as she was my wife. When they were satisfied that the apparent interlopers were actually my friends, an old woman beckoned them over to join her at the park bench. My wife knew only one phrase in Chinese, which meant hello, and she greeted the old woman with it. This caused great trouble in trying to explain to

the old woman that she knew no more than that of her language. The morning grew warmer, and droplets of sweat appeared on my brow. The old woman went into her handbag, produced a neatly ironed handkerchief, and waved at me. She patted her forehead gently and offered the hanky to me. I declined politely, but she insisted. I stopped working for a minute and took the neat cloth from her. She mimed putting something into her pocket and waved for me to do likewise with her hanky. I accepted graciously and now have a token of friendship that I shall cherish always. When we finished working, I thanked the man and joined my wife and friends with their new friend. The old woman seemed very happy in their company, even though they couldn't talk with her. Lots of animated gestures were exchanged, and my wife and friends told me the woman was eighty-five years old. I feigned surprise and wrote "85?" on a piece of paper, which I handed to her. She nodded vigorously and smiled proudly. I took the paper back and wrote "25!" before returning it for her inspection. She was now in fits of giggles.

When we were ready to leave the park, I looked round for my teacher, to say good-bye. He was seated on a park bench with a woman's leg draped across his. Moving towards them, I became aware of severe bruising down her leg, over which he moved his hands to help ease the pain of the injury. I quietly nodded to him and made to leave. He moved his finger toward his face, drawing me closer. I looked unsure, and he waved again. I knelt down beside them as he gestured for me to use my energy to help in the healing process. Feeling inadequate, I hesitated. Reassuring me, he placed my hands above her pained leg. I concentrated my intention towards her legs and felt the subtle force moving towards her. The man moved his hands up and down over mine and projected his energy through me in order to reinforce the flow. A few locals gathered and pointed to my hands, while excitedly shouting, "Chi! Chi!" This is the kind of event we tend to think of as happening only in fairy tales, but it was common practice for them to join their skills in a public park to assist friends in need.

Someone once told me that all the good T'ai chi masters had left China after the revolution.



Chi Kung (Qigong) being performed for healing in the early morning park.

Whatever the criteria they use for Master, I have no doubt, after the experiences I had in Beijing, that very good people are working there, in any park, on any day. They work quietly and unassumingly, with no financial reward. They are extremely open and willing to work with anyone interested enough to join them. Being a tourist, obviously, my perception was different. But judging from the groups of all ages and abilities working harmoniously in these parks, it felt to me that the real essence and spirit of T'ai Chi is very much alive in China today. ♦

By Ronnie Robinson, editor of Tai Chi Chuan Magazine, published by the Tai Chi Union of Great Britain and Connections Magazine of the United Kingdom. He can be contacted at 69 Kilpatrick Gardens, Clarkston, Glasgow G76 7RF Scotland, UK.