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MOVEMENTS FOR INNER DEVELOPMENT. FROM TAI CHI CHUAN TO BODY
AWARENESS THERAPY.

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Movements for inner development. From Tái chi chuan to Body Awareness Therapy.

Background

Many people today are midway between healthy and sick. They see their doctor and say " I do not feel well ". They are examined in many ways but nothing special can be found that explains their not feeling well. You can not get a specific diagnosis and you can not get a medical treatment. Others fell alienated from their background, from their natural environment, from their work and eventually from themselves. Many have written about the problem of alienation. Erich Fromm wrote about it in his book *Escape from Freedom*. Industrial development and quick changes in society in the 20th century has given man economic development and freedom to do what he wants on the one hand but on the other hand isolation and powerlessness. Wilhelm Reich wrote about alienation from natural lifeforces in his book *The Function of the Orgasm*. In Chinese taoistic philosophy and in Japanese zenphilosophy it is regarded important to be in touch with your true self to stay healthy. All kinds of alienation create problem within man such as muscular tensions and pain, organic disorders, psychological and social problems. All within the field of what today is called psycosomatic disorders and psycosocial problems. Recent research in Sweden, SOU:1994:148, points to the importance of good psycosocial conditions for our health and of course this is already known facts. A more interesting question in this research is " how come that certain people do not get ill though they live or work under difficult conditions" and on the other hand "how come that people get ill though their environment is safe, they have a good work and good social conditions". To find specific methods of treatment for this wide range of problems is not so easy and in the long run probably not so effective. Therefore today more and more interest turns to man's own possibilities to take care of himself, to activate his inner healing powers.

In the seventies I worked as a social worker. People came to me with their economic, social and psychological problems. This social work was entirely an intellectual work. The body was totally forgotten. In the beginning of the eighties I started my physiotherapy training. In this training the body was in the foreground. Psychological and social matters were not really taken into consideration. At that time I was introduced to Body Awareness Therapy and a little later to the Chinese art of movement Tái chi chuan. In these methods I found what I was looking for, the bridge between body and mind. I also found methods not only for treating symptoms but also for developing man's inner power and healing forces in order to deal with his own problems and to prevent problems and illness to occur.

In this short article I will give an introduction to Tái chi chuan and Body Awareness Therapy and their contribution to inner development.

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Tái chi chuan

Tái chi chuan is a system of body movements done slowly, with full concentration and at the same time in a relaxed way. Táí chí chuan has its origin in old Chinese philosophy. As an exercising system it is still practised in China often in the morning by people standing in parks and gardens. This system of slow movements is also gaining more and more popularity throughout the rest of the world.

To understand Táí chí chuan we have to know a little about principles of Táí chí. Chuan means fist and Táí chí chuan expresses through body-movements the principles of Táí chí. According to old Chinese philosophy Táí chí stands for "the supreme ultimate" and the two forces Yin and Yang. These two forces are often shown in a black and white symbol where the black is yin and the white is yang. Within the black part there is a white dot and within the white part there is a black dot to show the intimate interrelationship between yin and yang.

Yin and Yang represent two complementary forces that rule the entire universe. Though they are different in character they play together in an harmonious way to build one inseparable unit. The one force can not exist without the other. They are two sides of the same coin.

Yin is the origin, the grand mother. Representing the female aspect of life it stands for intuition, feeling, stillness, darkness, rest, contraction, coldness, inner, earth.

Yang stands for the male aspect of life such as expansion, warmth, intellect, light, activity, outer, heaven and also manifestations of yin.

Between yin and yang there is a continuous movement, a never ending change. Without anything being brought into the system from outside this continuous and natural transition takes place. When yin comes to its fulfillment it turns to yang and when yang comes to its fulfillment it turns to yin and yin starts to grow. Like that it goes on for ever. Day turns to night, winter to summer, activity is followed by rest or at least should be. This continuous change between yin and yang also takes place in the movements of Táí chí chuan acting and receiving breathing out and breathing in.

To follow and to be a part of the natural change between yin and yang is to follow the laws of nature according to the taoistic philosophy, founded by Lao Tsu about 500 years before Christ. To follow the laws of nature gives the best conditions for a life in harmony and health. To go against the laws of nature gives rise to problems and illness.

Historically Táí chí chuan can be traced to different sources. Within the taoistic philosophy it was regarded important to do slow harmonious movements to maintain a long life in good health. As early as 2500 years before Christ The Yellow Emperor recommended exercises to promote a long life. Another source is the buddhist monk Boddhidarma who came to China from India about 500 after Christ. He settled down in the Shao-Lin temple and started to give lessons in Buddhism and meditation. Too much sitting meditation though made the monks physically weak and tired. Boddhidarma saw the danger in that and started

to give lessons in body exercises. These exercises were a combination of meditation, traditional Chinese boxing and Indian martial art. This was the origin of Shao-Lin boxing which nowadays is supposed to be the start of Tái chi chuan.

The art of Shao-Lin boxing developed in different styles and was spread outside the temple. The different styles were named after different animals such as tigre, crane, snake to indicate that the different styles imitated these animals and the laws of nature. Traditional Shao-Lin boxing is the foundation of many modern martial arts such as karate in Japan, Tae kwon do in Korea, jujutsu and several others. The soft school of Tái chi chuan is traced back to the 14th century and the taoist monk Chang San-Feng. He was a great master of Shao-Lin boxing which was a rather fast and hard style where muscular strength and speed was important. It is said that Chang San-Feng in a dream saw a crane and a snake in a fight and after that he realised the importance of softness and the ability to yield and not to use too much energy and muscular strength in the movements. "The soft always conquers the hard" already Lao Tsu said.

After Chang San-Feng the historical development is uncertain. Today though there are different styles of Tái chi chuan. Some rather fast and hard like the Chen style and others very soft, slow and yielding like the Yang and Wu styles. These soft styles emphasize inner strength and the importance of softness rather than muscular strength.

The most popular style outside China is the Yang style and especially the short Yang style created by Cheng Man Ching who died in 1975. He learned the long Yang style from Yang Cheng Fu. Cheng Man Ching was a master not only in Tái chi chuan but also in Chinese medicine, poetry, calligraphy and painting. Cheng Man Ching developed the short form by taking away some repetitions and movements but the short form contains the most basic principles and the movements most beneficial to one's health. The short form takes about ten minutes to perform instead of thirty minutes for the original one and because of that the short form is more suitable for impatient westerners.

Tái chi chuan is a set of movements done in a slow way and with full concentration. Through these movements you express the principles of Tái chi, the laws of yin and yang and thus Tái chi chuan embrace life. To fully express the principles of yin and yang your Tái chi chuan training should consist of the three dimensions physical exercise, meditation and self-defense.

Tái chi chuan done as physical exercise first of all promotes good physical health. Tái chi chuan could be done everywhere without special equipment. As the movements are done slowly and with full concentration and never going to the extremes there is minimal risk to get hurt. You develop your balance and coordination. Relaxation is given great emphasis and combined with attention this develops your ability to use your body in an economic way preventing injuries due to overloading or bad health due to understimulation. Tái chi chuan is suitable for young as well as older people, you just have to adapt your training to your level.

Tái chi chuan as meditation improves your ability of awareness, you learn to be present in a situation in contact with yourself and with your environment. This makes you more receptive and able to act in a more spontaneous way and not according to fixed stereotype patterns. You change from rigidity to flexibility. Of course this is not an easy task. Very soon we discover how difficult it is to be fully aware in a situation. Our thoughts will wander from the past to the future and we think about either this or that. We loose contact with ourselves and our movements become stereotyped, mechanical and we do not know what to do. To be present in the actual situation is perhaps the most important aspect of Táí chi chuan done as meditation and what for most of us needs most practice.

As selfdefense we practice Táí chi chuan with a partner. In this training it is important to be soft, yielding, to be able to listen to, to feel the energy level and balance of your partner. Though this training is called push-hands it is rather to learn to play together than to push your partner with force. You develop your receptivity in a practical way. In contact with your partner you meet yourself, your own tendency to be aggressive, to always try to win or to always give up. On a bodily level your muscular tensions become very obvious. The least tension makes you a target for your partner. It is also very obvious how your muscular tensions reflect your inner level of emotional tensions. The training in selfdefense is perhaps not so important as real selfdefense. The most important is to meet yourself in contact with others. You train to play with an other person. You look out for your own reactions and attitudes and to be sensitive and open to yourself and others.

When you look at a Táí chi chuan player or dancer it looks so simple. Many have tried and suffered from these seemingly simple exercises. Mostly mentally because Táí chi chuan is so complex and there are so many details to keep in mind and that is the problem. You can not keep everything in mind. You have to give that up and let your body little by little learn these exercises by itself. You have to transform the exercises from your mind to your body. Your most difficult opponent is yourself and your attitudes, your own eager to do everything right. You have to give up a little of that and see reality as it is and work from that. Be patient and the results will come by themselves and not by you pushing to hard.

Body Awareness Therapy

Body Awareness Therapy is a holistic therapy developed in Sweden during the early seventies by Gertrud Roxendal, physiotherapist and Dr. of philosophy. The method was developed within the psychiatric field but is nowadays used within all kinds of physiotherapy both as individual therapy and as group therapy. In her work developing Body Awareness Therapy Gertrud Roxendal was inspired by the French movement teacher and psychotherapist Jaques Dropsy.

Body Awareness Therapy focuses both on body management, how to use your body in daily activities and on body experience, the mental representation of your body in the present. Body Awareness Therapy in treatment pays attention to building up ego-forces and not so much on reducing symptoms. Of course in a short-term perspective you might have to reduce or treat symptoms such as pain but in the long-term perspective you build up body-ego forces to be able to use your body in a more harmonious way and as a consequence to a change of your perception of your body.

Body Awareness Therapy has its theoretical and philosophical roots as well in western tradition as in eastern philosophy. The western background will not be dealt with in this article. The eastern background is Chinese philosophy in general but especially taoistic philosophy and the movement art Tái chi chuan. Japanese zentradition is another important source, which in many ways resembles the philosophy of taoism in emphasizing development of your own true nature, to be aware of yourself and the environment in the present situation and to develop your inner power. Body Awareness Therapy is a holistic therapy and is looked upon as one unit. Pedagogically we have to see what this unit consists of. According to Jaques Dropsy man consists of four dimensions.

"Man of stone" consists of the physical mass, bones, joints, ligaments. The pure dimension of man of stone is most visibly seen in the moment of death. Man of stone is subordinate to gravitation. In the sitting and standing positions we look for dynamic balance and a good relation to the ground, which goes for the lying position as well.

"Man of water" consists of physiological processes, life in us, life forces. Most visibly seen in blood circulation, beating of the heart, metabolism, the free breathing and postural reflexes. Life forces keeps us in an upright position and when there is balance between gravitation, pulling us to the ground and life forces there is lightness and naturalness in our actions.

The first two dimensions, man of stone and man of water, are bodily aspects of ourselves.

"Man of air" deals with psychological elements such as mental representations, feelings, emotions, impulses to act, the immediate awareness of ourselves and the environment.

"Man of fire" deals with the King within ourselves. He who takes every dimension into consideration and deliberately acts according to free will and intention. This dimension has to do with our selfreflecting ability, the "I am" within ourselves.

The last two dimensions, man of air and man of fire, deal with mental aspects. When the above mentioned aspects of ourselves are in harmony and well represented it gives us a feeling of unity and bodymind harmony.

In clinical practice Body Awareness Therapy is carried out through simple basic body movements done in different positions lying down, sitting, standing, walking and with a partner. All the time in total awareness. In addition to the exercises there are short talks about the experience of the exercises.

The exercises are organised or looked upon according to certain principles.

"Relation to the ground" has to do with giving the weight of the body to the ground. A safe and natural relation to the surface you are standing or sitting on gives a good starting point for action. If you trust the power of your legs you can relax not only in your legs but also in your whole body. This opens up for a free circulation of blood and energy, life forces, throughout the whole body. This principle is trained by giving attention to your contact with the ground and by experience of bodyweight in different positions.

"Relation to the centre-line of the body" has to do with the balance between gravitation, pulling us to the ground and life forces, keeping us upright and the overall arranging of the bodyparts along the centre line of the body. If you are leaning forward or backwards or to the side you are creating unnecessary tensions in your body and disturbing your dynamic balance. This gives instability and obstruction of your free breathing.

"The centre of the body" and the centre of ourselves has to do with two different aspects. In the first place it has to do with bodily aspects. Body Awareness Therapy looks at the body as a combination of two functional systems. The lower body with power and stability but not rigidity is mainly represented by the legs and pelvis. The upper body with chest, arms, head and qualities of openness, sensitivity and cognition. These two systems are connected in the movement-centre of the body placed in the area between the navel and the breastbone. Movements and the natural breathing have their common starting-point in this area and thus breathing and movements should be coordinated.

On the other hand deals with your attitude to be centred or not in yourself. When we discover that we are lost in memories, dreams, thoughts, fantasies we can return to ourselves and the present situation by focusing on our body and especially on the centre-area. This is like coming home and gives you a feeling of rootedness in yourself and a feeling of presence in the situation and this is a good startingpoint for spontaneous and natural actions and reactions. In this aspect centre deals with mental awareness, to always be present in the situation and pay attention to what happens within yourself and in your environment. To develop our ability to perceive our inner and outer life gives us enormous possibilities of selfexperience and growth.

"Breathing", as seen in small children, is the natural breathing and has to do with freedom. The natural breathing adapts to every situation and changes all the time with different movements and different emotions. The natural breathing is easily blocked by physical and emotional trauma which often creates lasting disturbances on a more or less conscious level. In Body Awareness Therapy we direct our attention to the breathing and observe how it works and primarily accept it as it is. In the long run breathing finds its natural place and rhythm as a result of bodywork with balance and freedom and mental work with awareness. Breathing is always integrated with movements to a functioning unit. The voice is also trained as a part of the whole by different sounds on exhalation.

Summary

As a summary I want to point to some important aspects in Tái chi chuan and Body Awareness therapy that contribute to our inner development.

Man is looked upon as one unit. Different aspects of man, psysically, mentally and spiritually are only different parts of the same unit. If one part of man is influenced the other parts are influenced as well. With bodymovements through your body you influence your other dimensions as well and get a total experience of yourself in the present situation and in the long run a change of your bodyimage.

To experience bodily signals is to exprience life within us. To turn to the life of our body for self-education and self-healing and to get close to the source of our inner power is to activate our own possibilities to take care of and responsibility for our own health.

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