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ONE

# Introduction

## *Beginnings*

THE ANCIENT Chinese art of Tai Chi, or *taijiquan*, is now widely recognised in Western, industrialised countries and some of its benefits are readily acknowledged. The slow, graceful movements of *taijiquan* are so well-known that they are occasionally used in television advertisements often just to signify relaxation or a healthy life-style. *Taijiquan* is visually appealing and people who watch it often remark that it looks relaxing. More importantly, the people who do it often say that it feels relaxing, and is relaxing too. Yet these practitioners often have a lot more to say about its effects on them. This book gathers together the stories of some people who practise *Taoist Tai Chi™ taijiquan* and other *Taoist Tai Chi™* internal arts of health, and who talk about their benefits for them.

Many people will have heard that *taijiquan* is good for relieving arthritis, or for improving balance, or reducing high blood pressure, or preventing osteoporosis, or helping with a range of other conditions. People who practise the *Taoist Tai Chi™* internal arts of health sometimes have these, or other, incurable or terminal, conditions such as Lou Gehrig's syndrome, Multiple Sclerosis, Cerebral Palsy, Alzheimer's, or have had cancer or a stroke. This book presents the stories of some people who have some of these conditions. Other people start practising these arts because they are unfit and want to get fit; overweight and

want to lose weight; and even because they are healthy and want to stay healthy, especially as they get older.

There are no miraculous cures to be had through the practice of these arts, but there can be, and are, remarkable transformational experiences and big improvements in functionality, even with the simple functions of everyday life, which many of us take for granted, such as walking and even standing. There are improvements in balance, strength and flexibility, and in a general sense of wellbeing, giving improved quality and increased length of life. Examples of this wide range of experience were recorded and are presented in this book.

*Taijiquan* is taught in a number of 'styles' or traditions. *Taoist Tai Chi™ taijiquan* is taught by the International Taoist Tai Chi Society ('the Society'). It emphasises the health-restoring and -maintaining aspects of *taijiquan* and other Taoist arts of health and well-being. Health-improvement is one of the core aims of the Society. Health, however, is not defined in this book (nor by the Society, I would suggest) in narrow, physical terms, but in broad, holistic terms that include physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, and even environmental health. These arts focus on the physical as the initial means to recover health in the other areas as well. Change the body to change the mind and spirit is a motto of the tradition of Taoism from which these arts and the Society and its teachings come.

*Taoist Tai Chi™ taijiquan* has a number of specific and demonstrable benefits. It is described in an old brochure published by the Taoist Tai Chi Society of Australia as:

a gentle art of health for people of all ages and health conditions. The slow, graceful movements of Taoist Tai Chi increase strength and flexibility and improve balance and circulation. The Taoist style of Tai Chi emphasises stretching and turning in each of the movements in order to gain these and other benefits more effectively.

The brochure goes on to relate that:

Regular practice of Taoist Tai Chi can bring a wide range of health benefits to the muscular, skeletal and circulatory systems. The flowing movements of Taoist Tai Chi serve as a moving meditation that reduces stress and provides a way to cultivate body and mind. Specific health benefits include:

- toning of muscles, tendons and other soft tissues;
- rotation of the joints through a full range of motion;
- stretching and alignment of the spine to make it strong and supple;
- gentle massage of the internal organs to improve their functioning.

This book documents these and other benefits anecdotally and autobiographically.

*Taoist Tai Chi™ taijiquan* and other internal arts of health were developed by Master Moy Lin-Shin (1931-1998) and brought to the West in 1970 when he initially founded the Taoist Tai Chi Society of Canada and later the International Taoist Tai Chi Society. Since then the Society has grown to be the largest non-profit, volunteer *taijiquan* organization in the world. These arts are practised in over 25 countries and 500 locations around the world, mainly in Europe, North America and Australia.

The people who tell their stories in this book come from these three continents. They were asked three questions in order to focus and direct the conversation: Why did you start learning *Taoist Tai Chi™ taijiquan*? Why do you continue practising it? What effect has practising it had on you? Answering these questions often involved the storytellers talking about the context in which these reasons and effects occur, and how that context contributes to producing the effects and reinforcing the reasons for continuing with the practice of this art. This context includes the experience of learning this art and being a part of the International Taoist Tai Chi Society. Practising this art is not an isolated, individual experience, but takes place in the context of the community of the Society. For this reason the storytellers usually talk about their experience of being a member of the Society, or of participating in a Health Recovery Program at a Society Centre. They also talk about how either or both being a member and participant contribute to improving their health and well-being. The reasons for continuing to practise this art and experiencing its effects are related to this context. These effects are largely expressed as benefits in physical health, and mental and spiritual well-being. The desire to gain those benefits is often the reason for taking up this art in the first place.

The Society is thus the context in which the benefits of practising this

art are nurtured. As Master Moy founded the Society, his teaching and vision are the source of those benefits, including the health benefits. Tracing the lineage of this art and the Society back to its source in Master Moy is not only the respectful thing to do, but also establishes the legitimacy and power of the practice and its health benefits. It is an important aspect of this art, and of the ongoing teaching of it, that an accomplished master taught it initially and did so for many years. The students of Master Moy hold him in great respect.

Master Moy, however, was not your stereotype of the guru who dressed flashily, drove a big car and lived a lavish lifestyle. He usually wore a Society tee-shirt and a track-suit with the Society logo on it. He never took a salary and he lived a very simple life. He also did not adopt the master position in which he was the all-seeing, all-knowing master on to whom the student transferred their desires and fears. Who and what he was will be discussed later, especially in the chapter devoted to him. Some of the storytellers in this book talk about their experience of meeting Master Moy and what their impressions of him were. They often go on to talk about specific ‘corrections’ to their *taijiquan* that he made, or other directions that he had given to them, both of which contributed to their recovering, or maintaining, their health, and to their life story. Some other storytellers who did not meet him talk about their impressions of him too.

Besides founding the Society and being the source of *Taoist Tai Chi™ taijiquan* and other arts of health and well-being, Master Moy also taught chanting and meditation. The Society offers instruction and practice in both at some locations as part of the Taoist lineage and heritage. These health-improving practices are complementary with the other arts and integral to the activities of the Society, to the process of health recovery and to stories about it. Some people tell their stories about chanting and meditation, and about the effects either, or both, have had on them. Generally the people who say they have received the most benefit (physically and spiritually) from membership of, and/or participation in the activities of, the Society are those who practise chanting and meditation as well as *Taoist Tai Chi™ taijiquan* and other arts.

The storytellers are a small, selective (non-random) sample of practitioners from various types of classes, programs and workshops. Their stories explore the motivation for practising these arts. In particular, the stories explore the reasons why these people chose these arts, their experience of practising them and their perception of the contribution that they have made to their lives. They also make observations about the teaching and learning of these arts and about the nature and functioning of classes and programs at Society sites. From these stories common themes are identified and discussed, and conclusions drawn about these arts and the Society.

This book not only presents these individual stories, but also tries to convey the experience of participating in the activities of the Society and the benefits gained from practising these arts, especially as a participant at a Health Recovery Program conducted by the Society. This is the only program of instruction in these arts offered to non-members. Anyone can come along and try them for themselves. These arts are usually accessible only to those who become members of the Society. Classes are not offered on a fee-for-service basis, but on the basis of membership dues. The philosophy behind the Society is that it is not a *taijiquan* club, but a social, spiritual and community organization that is, and does, a lot more than *taijiquan*. These arts are not a commodity the consumer can buy. Members pay dues to belong to the Society and membership entitles them to instruction and participation in a class.

### *Background*

The background to the research for this book was that I had been investigating the Taoist body, Taoist ecology and illness narratives, or pathographies. These are personal accounts of illness, written usually by the person with the illness (auto-pathography). They usually recount an experience with illness that starts with a diagnosis, searching for, and possibly finding, a cure, undergoing surgery or other treatment, and ends with living with the illness, or in death. They are elaborated, written and published narratives. They are published in either books or magazines. Journalists, novelists and sociologists largely write those published

in book-form about themselves. They have the writing expertise and experience, and access to publishers, needed to produce books. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule with the odd champion cyclist thrown in such as Lance Armstrong, but in such cases celebrity status greases the wheels of publication. Illness narratives published in magazines are written either by journalists about celebrities, or by non-celebrities about themselves with some editorial or journalistic assistance. They are all amazing and inspiring stories of bravery and heroism in the face of incredible odds, sometimes with remarkable results.

From my experience of practising the *Taoist Tai Chi*<sup>™</sup> internal arts of health and of being an instructor *Taoist Tai Chi*<sup>™</sup> *taijiquan* for more than 20 years, I knew that there were other stories being told by practitioners of recovered and maintained health, or improved quality and increased length of life. Unlike the illness narrative where the narrator often has an operable or potentially curable condition such as cancer, many of the tellers of what could be called 'health recovery stories' have inoperable or incurable conditions such as MS or ALS. Cancer lends itself to the typical trajectory of the illness narrative wherein the narrator descends into the murky underworld of the hospital and clinic to emerge triumphant or vanquished in the end, with or without the assistance of medical and nursing helpers.

By contrast, the health recovery story is a story without the same peaks and troughs, beginnings and endings. It is a story of ups and downs, occasional breakthroughs and setbacks in trying to improve health, always with the assistance and help of instructors and others in the same boat. Health recovery stories are unelaborated, oral and largely unpublished accounts told by people from a range of backgrounds with different expertise and experience. Some of these stories of health recovery or improvement have been told in 'testimonials' published in newsletters by the Society or have circulated in oral form amongst members and practitioners. They have not been told to the wider public. This book tells some of those health recovery stories more widely. It also includes some testimonials.

However, this book does not just present individual health recovery stories in isolation. The chapters are not organized around individual

people, though they are divided into sections for each informant. These sections foreground a theme mentioned by these people. The chapters are organised around common topics and concerns that emerged from listening to, transcribing, reading, and rereading, the stories. These are more to do with Taoism and the International Taoist Tai Chi Society than just with *Taoist Tai Chi™ taijiquan*. This book presents Taoism as a biospiritual practice, or cultivation, involving a holistic transformation of mind, body and spirit. Similarly, body, mind and spirit are nurtured within and by the culture and community of the International Taoist Tai Chi Society. Yet the benefits of this practice are not only experienced by those who call themselves ‘Taoists’ but are readily available to all who practise this *taijiquan* and are members of the Society or participate in its programs. Health recovery stories are primarily stories about Taoism and the International Taoist Tai Chi Society, and not just about *taijiquan*. The book, as conveyed in its title and sub-title, focuses on this and others arts as a way to gain access to, and stimulate interest in, and even inspire participation in, Taoism and the Society.

The Society is largely an oral culture where its activities take place in a face-to-face situation, including learning this art. In fact, it is recommended that everyone learns in a class, and not from a book or video. It is difficult, if not impossible, to learn from a book or video, though the Society has both available as they have a useful function to provide aids to memory about moves, and the sequence of moves, taught in a class. This present book, by contrast, tries to give a sense of the oral culture of the Society by presenting stories about it. These stories are excerpted from transcriptions of interviews, an oral genre. Of course, this book is a written account, too, like illness narratives. It is thus a pale imitation of actually talking to the people who told their stories initially face-to-face. Hopefully, though, it tells their stories adequately and gives a sense of their experience, and of the oral culture of the Society. A number of men and women, of different ages, from a variety of backgrounds, of various nationalities, in good or poor health (or somewhere between them) tell their stories. These stories show that the practice of the *Taoist Tai Chi™* internal arts of health is not just for the old or young, mobile or immobile, sick or ill, fit or unfit. It is for everybody.

What other activity or club has members that range in age from 9 to 90, from those in the pink of health to those on death's door, from those who cannot feed themselves, stand up or walk unaided to those who do rolls, splits and headstands? And all this is done in a friendly, non-competitive and supportive environment.

### *Setting*

The rolling hills of rural Ontario in Canada are the perfect location for the International Health Recovery Centre of the International Taoist Tai Chi Society. It is located in the Mono area near Orangeville, about a 35-40 minute drive north-west of Toronto. The peaceful atmosphere of the Centre and its grounds provide an ideal, and idyllic, retreat and refuge for people to focus and work on regaining and improving their health. The property is about 106 acres in size. It includes a secluded wood through which the Bruce Trail wends on its way from Niagara Falls to the tip of Bruce Peninsula.

I visited this Centre and stayed there for 6 weeks from July to September in 2003 when I was on Study Leave from Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia. I also made a brief visit to the Taoist Tai Chi Society of the USA Centre in Tallahassee, Florida. The Orangeville Centre in Canada is unique and its work is invaluable (and all royalties from the sale of this book go to help support it). It provides rich opportunities for research into the *Taoist Tai Chi*<sup>™</sup> internal arts of health not available elsewhere in the world as nothing like this Centre exists anywhere else. This book presents to outsiders for the first time insiders' stories about the Centre and the Society.

I visited the centre at Orangeville much like an anthropologist visits a remote tribe, studies their practices, rituals and life-ways, and then brings home the booty in the form of an ethnographic study comprising knowledge of that other culture. It is as if there is this strange tribe scattered around the world whose members practise some aspects of the ancient Chinese arts of healing. Generally members of the tribe have jobs and families, but occasionally some of them come to their Centre in Canada to work together intensively on their own *taijiquan*,

to improve their health, and to teach and help others. I wanted to study the life and activities of this Centre and concentrate on the community and culture of the *Taoist Tai Chi*<sup>™</sup> internal arts of health and of the Society, and only focus on individuals as the bearers of knowledge and as informants about both. The aim was not to showcase or privilege the experience of those individuals, but to use it as a means of presenting the culture and community of these arts and the Society as the context for health recovery and stories about it.

Of course, in the case of this ethnographic study, as a member of the Taoist Tai Chi Society of Australia and an instructor of *Taoist Tai Chi*<sup>™</sup> *taijiquan* myself, I belong in some sense to the same (modern, Western) culture and (*Taoist Tai Chi*<sup>™</sup>) 'tribe.' Yet there are cultural differences between the various classes outlined above and between Canada and the US to which I travelled and Australia from where I came. I acknowledge and respect these differences and reflected critically on the process of the research, including in both recording observations and conducting interviews. As a member of the same 'tribe' (albeit in a remote location in Australia) I was not a dispassionate observer, but rather a participant observer conducting fieldwork in a semi-familiar place. It was familiar in the sense that the people practised this art like me; unfamiliar in the sense that they were practising it in Ontario and Florida in two countries (and indeed in a hemisphere) that I had not visited before. In technical terms, I was doing ethnography from within (if that is possible).

My function as ethnographer was to engage in dialogue with the interviewees and to allow them to tell their own stories. My role as writer has been to make observations, draw conclusions, avoid editorialising and generally let the storytellers speak directly to the reader without interruption. My position as author is not that of an objective reporter, but of an engaged advocate. I am too implicated and involved as an instructor of this *taijiquan* and office bearer of the Society, and have been for too long, to try to, or to pretend to, stand outside it and observe it from that point of view. This book is for outsiders with insiders' stories by an insider. For those who are interested, I reflect more on these aspects, and in more academic terms, in the final chapter.

Being a participant-observer was certainly the case during the first week I was at the Orangeville Centre. I arrived just before a five-day Health Recovery Program commenced. The Administrator of the Centre, Kelly Ekman and the Medical Director, Dr Bruce McFarlane, asked me to be a Participant for this week so that I could become familiar with a Health Recovery program. I attended two subsequent Health Recovery weeks, the next one as an Assistant and the final one as the researcher (and amateur photographer) for this book. Through this process I was able to learn about the operations of the Centre and the activities of a Health Recovery Program from the point of view of both a Participant and an Assistant. I was also able to make contact and develop trust with potential storytellers. I also kept a journal in which I made observations about the life, activities and people of the Centre, including some of the storytellers. Some of these observations are presented in the final chapter.

How did I choose the storytellers? Or how did they choose to become involved? The 'sample' selected is not random, though it is rather arbitrary. I wanted to interview a broad range of people on the continuums of age, health and mobility as I have indicated. There was a touch of serendipity to it. Some people who told me their stories I had met only 5 minutes before. Others had become friends over several weeks, and occasionally months, of practising the *Taoist Tai Chi*<sup>™</sup> internal arts of health together, eating meals together, washing dishes together and enjoying conversation. The Centre at Orangeville is like that. People live together, work together, practise *taijiquan* and other arts together and share the common tasks of everyday life together. And have a lot of fun and laugh a lot doing them. Generally the storytellers were interested in the project and wanted to help out. People who practise these arts are like that. Sometimes I had heard that they had an interesting or remarkable story to tell that others should hear. At other times I didn't know much about them at all. Our paths crossed and we stopped for a chat that was recorded and later transcribed, some bits of which made their way into this book.

This book is a kind of photo album of snapshots showing people in certain places at particular times talking about their experience of

practising the *Taoist Tai Chi*<sup>™</sup> internal arts of health and being members of the Society or participants in its activities. It does not pretend to be representative of all the people, and their experiences, who practise these arts. Yet these stories have validity in their own right, though it is not possible to extrapolate from this small sample of informants and to generalise from them about these arts, the Society and its effects on people. The book aims to give a flavour of the range of what happens in the Society. If you go to these places and talk to these people, they may tell you something slightly different on any given day. If you go to these places and talk to different people, they may tell you something slightly different. If you go to different places and talk to different people, they will tell you something slightly different too. Every person's experience of practising these arts of health is different and unique. Yet there are some commonalities and some surprising similarities between what practitioners say about them, and what members of the Society say about them. Those commonalities and similarities will become apparent in more detail later.

It may be valuable at this point to indicate a common theme in order to set the scene for what follows. One of the major, common characteristics that the storytellers repeatedly talked about is the social solidarity and support that the International Taoist Tai Chi Society provides to them and other members. The Society is a kind of second family and second home for many people that adds to, or replaces, their first family and home, which could be unsatisfactory or unsupportive or no longer available or in existence. This sense of community is important for improving or maintaining health and well-being. Yet the Society is not a social club or a cult. It is the context for hard work, physical effort, spiritual nurturing and mental dedication. This holistic approach to health combines the mental, physical, social and spiritual. It gives a deeply satisfying experience and provides the opportunity for lifelong learning.

Yet the aim of the book is not to paint a rosy picture and create unrealistic expectations, certainly not of miraculous cures. The Society is not utopia, and the *Taoist Tai Chi*<sup>™</sup> internal arts of health are not a panacea, though they help to cure many of the world's, and people's, ills.

The Society is a human institution and these arts are a human activity. Both are flawed and far from perfect, like all human institutions and activities. On the whole, though, you meet a great bunch of nice people who get along well with each other, and who help and support each other. Of course, there are tensions and frictions, misunderstandings and outbursts, ‘personality clashes’ and the occasional unseemly argument, but not a lot of bitchiness or political infighting. Those who find all this niceness too much to handle leave.

Others leave for other reasons. Some people come expecting miracle cures and don’t get them; some people leave in frustration, their expectations, for whatever reason, not met; some people come to try out *Taoist Tai Chi™ taijiquan* and find it’s not for them; some people leave because they did not realize that they would have to work so hard at it; some people come as customers to sample the wares and find that there is nothing to buy; some people come to try it because they’ve tried yoga, and/or boot-scooting, and/or ballroom dancing and/or Chinese cooking, so *taijiquan* is next; some people leave after the novelty wears off, or it becomes too hard, or too open-ended, or whatever. Everyone is welcome to come and free to go, as signs say at some locations.

And some people come and stay, for a while at least. One person who tells their story in this book had only been practising these arts for 5 days. Others stay for a long time, sometimes for many years, even decades. Another person who tells their story has been practising them for 25 years. In between were those who have been practising them for varying lengths of time. Sometimes some of these people speculated occasionally on why people leave, but no one tracks them down to ask them why and most don’t come back to say why. These are not their stories.

## *Outline*

These are the stories of people who have learnt *Taoist Tai Chi™ taijiquan* and other internal arts of health and who tell their stories about doing so beginning with chapter 2. They talk about their experience of learning these arts and what they have gained from them. In order

to learn, there has to be teaching. Stories about teaching these arts are told in chapter 3. Not only those who are officially designated as instructors, but also those who are participants in programs tell these stories. These are not stories about teaching a move or technique, but about lessons in life, in caring and compassion taught in and outside classes. In this sense, everyone is a teacher in the International Taoist Tai Chi Society. Teaching and learning take place in the setting of a class as well, and some instructors talk about their classes and teaching them, and learning from them, in chapter 4. These instructors have trained to teach during programs at the International Centre at Orangeville and they talk about these programs in chapter 5. Participants in health recovery programs also tell their stories about participating in these programs in this chapter. Some instructors, some of whom are health professionals, others of whom are interested amateurs, talk about some of the medical or health aspects of these arts in chapter 6.

Some instructors and participants have found that chanting and meditation are beneficial and that they complement *Taoist Tai Chi™ taijiquan* in gaining physical, mental and spiritual benefits. They talk about chanting and meditation and their benefits in chapter 7. Master Moy initially taught these arts. He figured prominently and repeatedly in people's stories, not as a distant master to revere, but as a real force for change for the better in their lives. Their accounts of him are assembled in chapter 8. He founded the International Taoist Tai Chi Society as the context and culture in which those arts are cultivated. Stories about the Society are told in chapter 9. Chapter 10 reflects on the research for this book, including in the context of previous research on *taijiquan*. It also presents some of the observations made during the health recovery programs I attended and recorded in a journal on a spasmodic basis. Finally, it outlines some possible future directions for research into the *Taoist Tai Chi™* internal arts of health. This book has only scratched the surface of a very rich and deep vein of knowledge and experience in Taoism, these arts and the International Taoist Tai Chi Society. It is a beginning, and as the *Tao te ching* says, a journey of a thousand kilometres starts with the first step from where we are standing now. This book is one small step in a long journey.