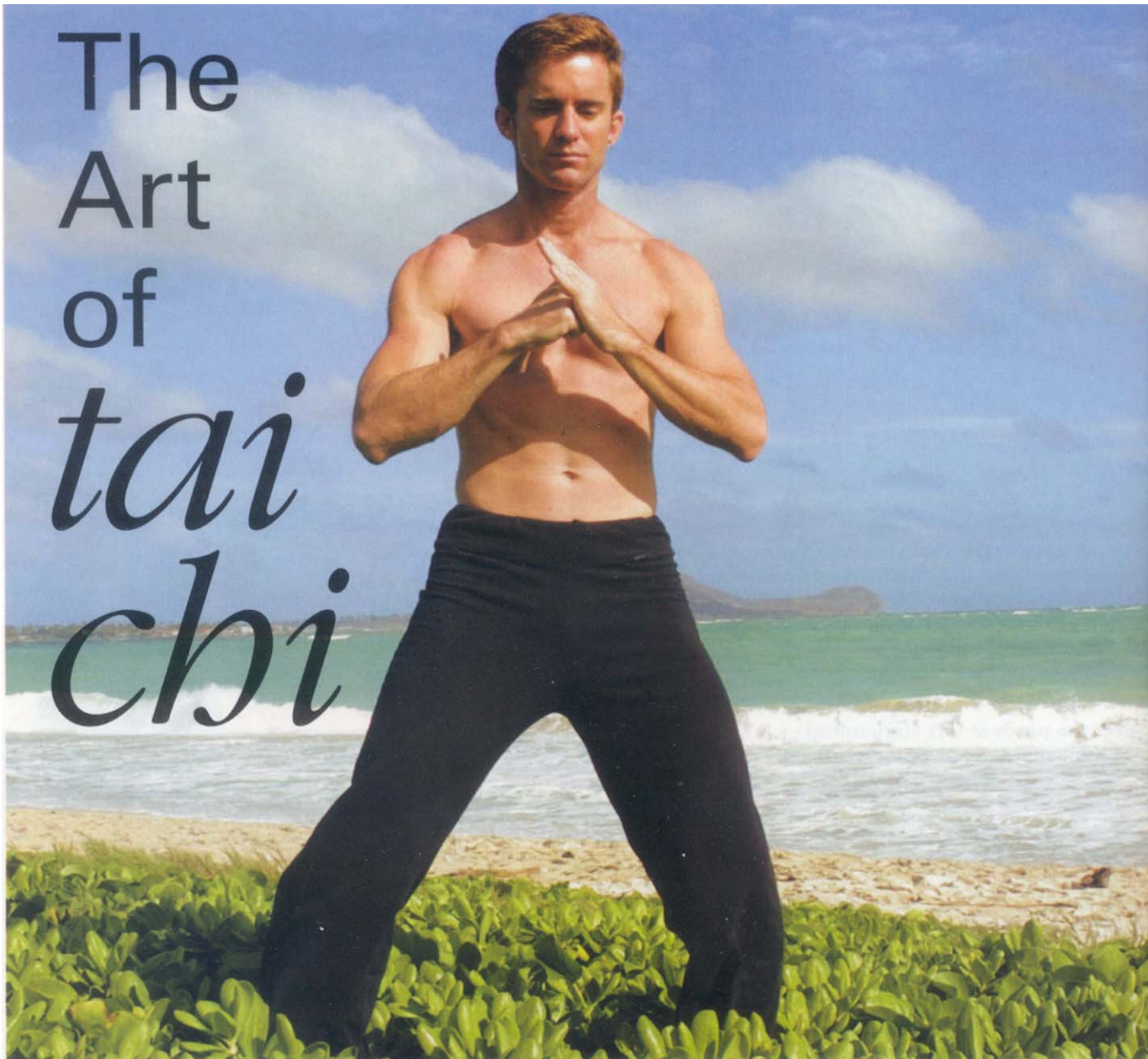


The Art of *tai chi*



Or how I learned to move through life gracefully, let go of expectations, and revel in the beauty of the present.

by **Scott Cole**

Thousands of years ago the ancient Chinese people discovered that organic movement, like that found in nature, was one of the keys to ridding the body of ailments. They explored and documented this invisible life force, or energy, called “chi,” which was present in all things, and created movements to mimic those found in nature—among them: Wave Hands Like Clouds, Bending Bear, Repulse the Monkey, Snake Creeps Down, and a personal favorite, Beautiful Woman Turns Her Waist. These movements, practiced in both Chi Kung and Tai Chi, became known not only for their beauty and grace, but for their therapeutic power as well. The healing art of Chi Kung,

which consists of thousands of movements, techniques, and energy exercises, began to evolve and become an integral part of Chinese medicine. China became more powerful and wise during the time of the Hundred Schools of Philosophy, bringing forth Taoism and Buddhism, and inclusive beautiful insights like the balancing of opposites (Yin/Yang)—hot/cold, hard/ soft, mountain/valley, male/female.

Contemporary with the philosopher Confucius, the great written collection of Taoist insights and principles, the Tao Te Ching, is credited to philosopher Lao Tzu, and illustrates the path of least resistance, and The Way of Life (Tao=The Way). Lao Tzu, known as the father of Taoism, was



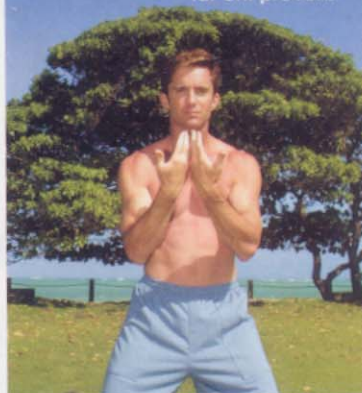
Author Scott Cole, creator of the *Discover Tai Chi* series, demonstrates the traditional Yang opening.

PHOTOS BY DAVID MURPHY, COURTESY OF NATURAL JOURNEYS

a man way ahead of his time by Western standards, and the Tao Te Ching extols the beauty of both male and female qualities surrounding all of us, and present in all of us. Less is more, more is less, water flowing around a rock, and a tree blowing effortlessly in the breeze are all examples of these Taoist-inspired principles, which are inseparable from the later-evolving martial art of Tai Chi. Waiting for the right moment, and feeling the energy around you are fundamental to the practice of Tai Chi. Contrivance is ill advised and out-of-the-moment, while in-the-moment spontaneous deflection is honored. The internal intrinsic martial art of Tai Chi does not consider external attack. Forcing an issue of any kind, be it physical or mental, is considered both un-evolved and unimpressive by Taoist terms. Tai Chi is the

"He who sees life as a race will lose it."

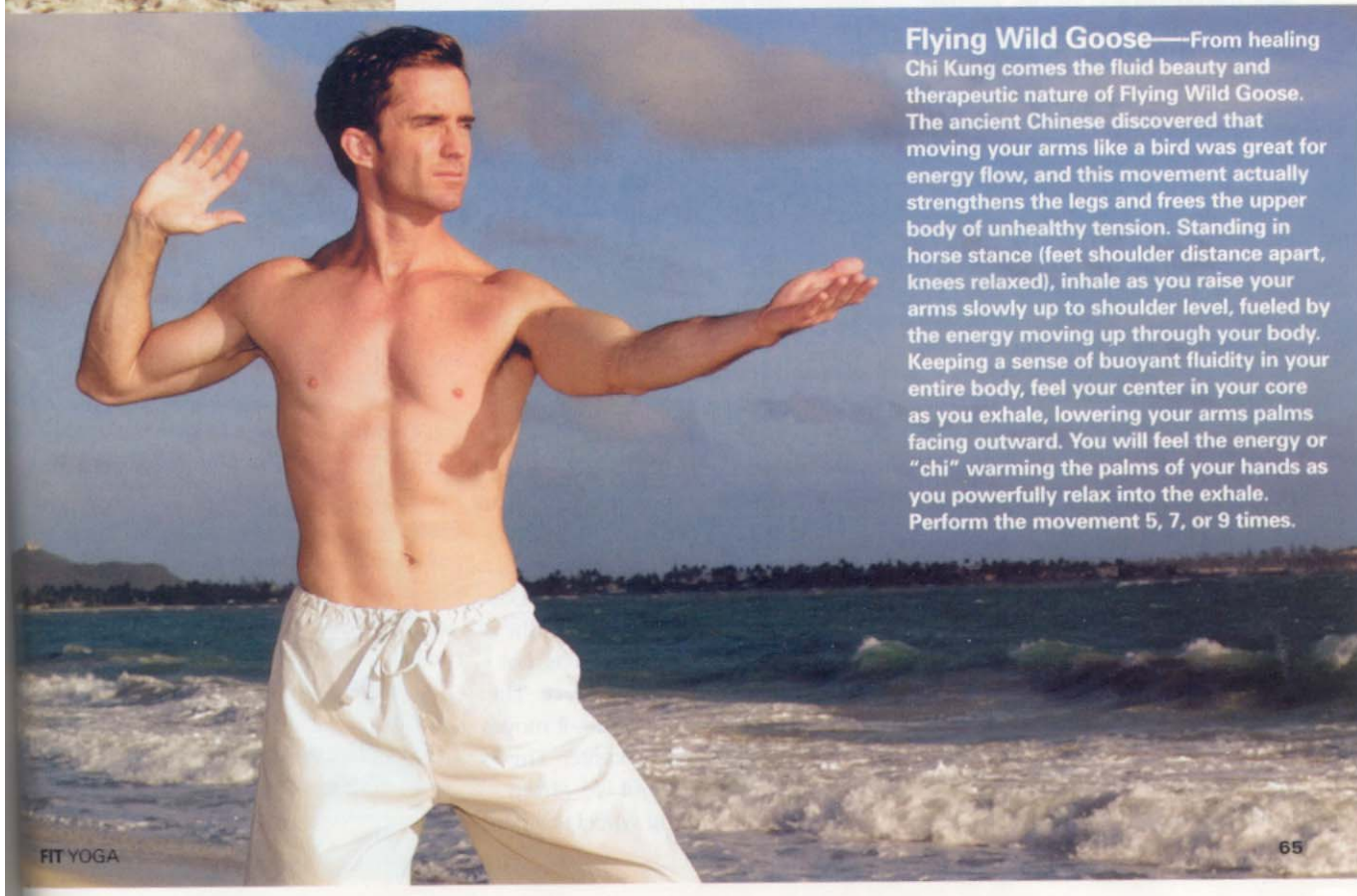
Tai Chi proverb



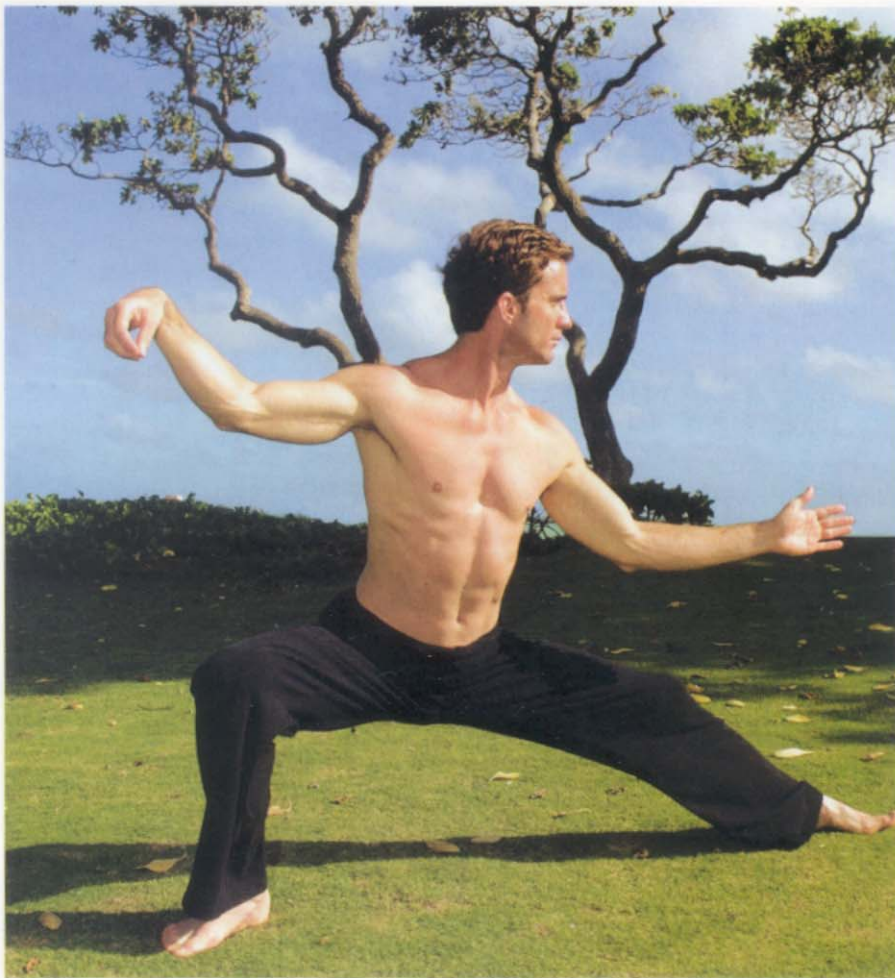
natural movement through life, the letting go of expectation, and the revelation of the beauty of the present.

Tai Chi also incorporates many Chi Kung therapeutic movements, like Wave Hands Like Clouds (aka "Heaven Hands"). The slow set of Tai Chi primarily lays a new blueprint of movement so the practitioner enhances his or her

own chi, and learns to move organically, and work with the energy around him or her, not against it. Tai Chi is movement: always breathing, never ceasing, which is why it is often called "the moving meditation". A euphoric state of heightened awareness is created by placing mental focus on the core (at a point called the Dan Tien, located two inches below the navel), and keeping the breath moving in and out through the nose with the tongue resting lightly be-



Flying Wild Goose—From healing Chi Kung comes the fluid beauty and therapeutic nature of Flying Wild Goose. The ancient Chinese discovered that moving your arms like a bird was great for energy flow, and this movement actually strengthens the legs and frees the upper body of unhealthy tension. Standing in horse stance (feet shoulder distance apart, knees relaxed), inhale as you raise your arms slowly up to shoulder level, fueled by the energy moving up through your body. Keeping a sense of buoyant fluidity in your entire body, feel your center in your core as you exhale, lowering your arms palms facing outward. You will feel the energy or "chi" warming the palms of your hands as you powerfully relax into the exhale. Perform the movement 5, 7, or 9 times.



Snake Creeps Down—Snake Creeps Down is one of the grandest of the Tai Chi postures, and I have chosen it to showcase the gentle yet immense physicality and strength that Tai Chi has to offer. Like all Tai Chi postures, there is a self-defense application as well as an energy-building aspect. It is a deflective move, and a potential coil to strike if necessary. This posture also teaches you to remain aware of your center of balance. I often joke with students that if your snake creeps down, it must be able to creep back up again otherwise you will be stuck in an impressive but functionless posture. Ultimately—in the realm of ideal balance—the rising up out of Snake Creeps Down should be equally as smooth as the graceful descent. The best way to describe it is a 70-30 plie, with 70% of your weight into the back supporting leg. Breathing your way down and back into the posture, it is important to be aware of your strength and flexibility. Try not to contrive the posture but sink gently into it. In all Tai Chi postures, you remain resilient, avoiding locking the joints, and there is always a breathable “settling in” to the postures. Forcing your way into something uncomfortable is simply not the way in Tai Chi. Try this posture first with a smaller leg base, and work your way through patient repetition into a more balanced strength/stretch combination. Try the posture 5 times on one side, then 5 on the other for muscular balance.

hind the top row of teeth, gently touching the roof of the mouth. This connection completes the gap between the Ren and Du channels, and coupled with Tai Chi’s gentle movement, generates the sacred healing saliva that is credited for the digestive improvement and stress relief felt by many Tai Chi practitioners.

Considered both the grandfather and grandmother of martial arts, Tai Chi has many benefits and applications—self-defense, stress reduction, improved balance, coordination, digestion, strength, and flexibility. Tai

Chi and yoga are extremely beneficial to practice together. The fluidity derived from Tai Chi adds grace and flow to your yoga, while the strength and flexibility derived from yoga can only enhance your balance and proficiency in Tai Chi.

Like a stiff or rigid tree, the body can break under pressure. Tai Chi teaches the deflection of force, not the aggression of applied force. The tree doesn’t resist the wind, it moves with it, maintaining its center. This is helpful in all aspects of life—from gripping the steering wheel too hard,

to belaboring a conflicted relationship—and the lessons from Tai Chi are always applicable at a multidimensional level. The path of least resistance, the movement of energy with the least amount of effort, and the deflection of negative energy to retain your powerful beautiful center, remaining unmoved, undaunted, and blissfully happy—sounds good, huh? It is. ☯

Scott Cole’s work has been featured in The Wall Street Journal, and in over 300 publications worldwide. His dedication to mainstreaming the martial and healing arts has garnered guest appearances on LIVE with Regis and Kelly, The Early Show, CNN Headline News, and as a recurring guest on ABC’s The View. Connect with Scott, and check out his Discover Tai Chi video/DVD series at www.scottcole.com.

Hilariously in line with the Tao,

author Scott Cole’s journey into Tai Chi is both fateful and fortuitous.

After traveling the world as an aerobic maniac (and proud of it), I could feel that I needed to do something slower, quieter, more introspective. Not really knowing what Tai Chi was, other than Chinese people moving slowly in the park, a friend of mine in LA said one day, “Dude, you want to take Tai Chi?” I remember feeling this definite surge of curiosity, and I said, “Ok.” We went to Master Tim O’Connor’s class in a Beverly Hills dance studio. My friend stayed for one lesson, and well, here I am, quoting Lao Tzu and loving what Tai Chi and Master Tim have brought to my life. Staying in the flow of one’s work, letting go of attachment to outcome is not always easy in our result-oriented world. Stephen Mitchell’s translation of the Tao Te Ching is marvelous, and I’d like to share two of my favorite Taoist-inspired quotes:

“When Spring comes, the grass grows by itself.”

“Do your work, then step back, the only path to serenity.”