



# Application of T'ai Chi Chuan to Massage Therapy

By Patrik Donahue and A.J. Allen

An effective massage transforms body tension into relaxation and revitalization. We can say the same thing about the practice of T'ai Chi Chuan: it can be described as massage from the inside out. The state of the practitioner's mind and body is transmitted directly and indirectly to his/her clients. Thus, if we want to optimize our bodywork with others, we must first be aware of this relationship and at the same time, know how to attend to the needs of our own bodies and minds.

T'ai Chi teaches the balance of emptiness and lightness (yin) with fullness and weightedness (yang). Developing a mind of empty awareness produces a potential for healing in ourselves and with others that is unparalleled; and this empty awareness is an objective friend which helps evaluate where we are physically, emotionally, mentally, and energetically. This in turn maximizes what goes on between the practitioner and the client because it reflects the best of both.

A 'chi body' enjoys a sense of lightness; this lightness leads to movement; the motion leads to change; change leads to adaptability; adaptability leads to growth; and T'ai Chi growth is a joyful experience.

Practicing T'ai Chi is both a science and an art, as is massage therapy. In T'ai Chi, the ability to be sensitive in the body and to be firm in one's response is based on principles. Some of the important principles are: a straight, relaxed, and "tsung" body, and an ability to shift the weight within oneself from empty to full or from yin to yang. These principles are taught early in the T'ai Chi form and are valuable for health and self-defense. A "tsung" body has relaxed the tension down toward the earth and therefore, is not expending any extra effort to stay up and function physically in the world.

Another important principle, useful in massage therapy and learned in early T'ai Chi form work, is 70–30 stance in which one leg supports 70% of the practitioner's weight and the other leg, 30%. This stance helps maximize strength and endurance and does not overextend the harmonic balance of the body.

In T'ai Chi, the 'Tantien' refers to the center of equilibrium in the body. A very helpful principle for the massage practitioner is to be able to center consciousness in the Tantien and to allow the weight of the practitioner's body to underlie and support the flow of pressure and focus through relaxed arms. The openness that this produces in client and practitioner facilitates the flow of chi—vital energy—in both.



## What are some of the other benefits of T'ai Chi?

- A greater strength in all parts of the body: T'ai Chi movements activate the chi flow of energy through the body's meridians, much as does good massage or acupuncture.
- Endurance—a valuable aid to the really busy and successful practitioner.
- More efficient use of oxygen.
- Bone density and thickness increase as we learn to focus and generate the chi in the abdomen and direct its flow to the marrow of the bones.
- Increased pliability.
- Inner calm, with the release of endorphins, which increase positive feelings.
- Improved balance and coordination.
- Lower blood pressure from regular practice of T'ai Chi.
- Helps one to simultaneously focus energy and attention inwardly and outwardly.
- Practicing the T'ai Chi form can help to prevent injury and depletion for the practitioner.

A T'ai Chi round in the morning and a T'ai Chi round in the evening lift a down day and dissolve a cranky attitude. In future articles, we will focus on the chi of sound, breath, and harmony in the Body-Mind-Spirit.

## Who we are:

Patrik Donahue has been a T'ai Chi practitioner and teacher since 1975; AJ Allen teaches in the Portland Branch of The School of T'ai Chi Chuan, which she co-founded with Patrik in 1988. Patrik has taught and practiced massage therapy for 30 years. He also has a private practice in Process Integration Work in Portland. AJ studied massage therapy at the Institute of Psycho-Social Balance (IPSB). She is a professional Health Planner with interest in regional and national health systems, and works for the US Department of Veterans Affairs. Patrik and AJ enjoy discovering new creative ways to apply T'ai Chi principles in work and life.