Human beings are by nature embodied creatures. The very foundation of our life is the concrete, material reality into which we are born and which we shape. As the basis of our existence, the body is a source of great pleasure and overwhelming pain, a giver of deep satisfaction and utter misery, the root of potential perfection and dismal failure.

The Chinese have realized this fact and, over several millennia, have made the body the foundation of the great human endeavor of perfection: the perfection of health and well-being, the perfection of long life in youthful vigor, and the perfection of spirit in transcendence to an otherworldly realm. They have always understood the elementary need for accepting one’s basic inborn qualities while yet working to live up to one’s full potential, caring for and cultivating the body to the best of one’s abilities. To this end, they have developed a plethora of methods, called longevity techniques, that can restore health, enhance the quality of life, prolong life expectancy, and even aid in the ultimate goal of spiritual transcendence.

Healing exercises, called Daoyin, constitute one form of these techniques. Documented already in Chinese antiquity, they have evolved and expanded over the centuries, are popular in China in their current forms of qigong (also chi kung) and taiji quan (also tai chi ch’uan), and have recently made inroads in Western health and spiritual circles. What, then, is the fundamental understanding of the human body in Chinese culture? What exactly are “longevity techniques” and how do they work? What is Daoyin, how is it done, where does it come from? And, finally, are there comparative methods in other cultures and the modern West that may be more familiar and thus help us explore the exact workings of the practice?

The Body and the Dao

The body in traditional China is closely connected to and even a replica of the Dao. The Dao is at the base of all creation; it is the fundamental productive power of the universe that causes things to come into existence and maintains them throughout. There is only one Dao, and all beings are part of this Dao, although most are not aware of it. People, the ancient texts say, are in the Dao like fish are in water.
Like water, the Dao is everywhere—around us, in us, with us. It flows naturally along its channels—in the body, in nature, in society. It is steady, fluid, easy, soft and weak; it never pushes, fights, or controls but is powerful by merely going along. People do not know it, but it the Dao always there, always sustaining, like a mother—the mother of the universe, the mother of all existence, the mother of all of us. It brings forth and nurtures; it cares and raises; it supports and moves along. Whatever we do, whoever we are, whatever we become, it is always part of the Dao.¹

These two metaphors of water and mother express the nature of the Chinese universe as beneficent: soothing, protecting, generative. Both water and mother, of course, can be threatening. There are overpowering mothers whom one would not dare cross; there are mythical mothers who devour their children. And there are floods and droughts, when water can become a life-threatening force. However, in most people’s experience and in their ideal understanding, water and mother tend to be generous and supporting. These metaphors thus reveal a sense of being in the world that involves feeling at home; moving with the flow in non-action (wuwei 無為); being at ease and well protected, nurtured, and supported; and having a place and a direction that is natural. The body as the Dao is thus our most elementary home, the root from which we act and on which we rely at all times and in all our endeavors.

The natural place and direction presented in the body through the Dao is there for everyone, but it is also different for everyone. Just as in the natural world every species has its own habitat and specific characteristics, and each animal within its group has its role and position, so people have their unique physical characteristics, their special abilities and tendencies. Exploring and developing these, they ideally find a way of being in the world that is just their own—a role that is perfect for them, a home that completely matches their personality and abilities, a place from which they can live a long and healthy life and which can become the starting point for spiritual transcendence.

**Vital Energy**

The Chinese talk about people’s inherently individual yet cosmically connected nature in terms of a vital energy known as qi 氣. Qi is the material and tangible aspect of the Dao. It can be described as a bioenergetic potency that causes things to live, grow, develop, and decline. People as much as the planet are originally equipped with prenatal or primordial qi that connects them to the greater universe, but they also work with postnatal or interactive qi, which can

¹. Mother and water are both metaphors that already appear in the ancient Daode jing. For a study of the mother image, see Chen 1974. For a discussion of both in later Daoist thought, see Kohn 1991, 131–133.
enhance or diminish their primordial energy. Qi is the basic material of all that exists. It animates life and furnishes the functional power of events. Qi is the root of the human body; its quality and movement determine human health. Qi can be discussed in terms of quantity, since having more means stronger metabolic function. This, however, does not mean that health is a by-product of storing large quantities of qi. Rather, there is a normal or healthy amount of qi in every person and every aspect of nature, and health manifests in its overall balance and harmony, in the moderation and smoothness of flow.2

Just as the Dao is compared to water, the flow of qi is envisioned as a complex system of waterways both in nature and in the human body. In the latter, the “Ocean of Qi” is in the abdomen; rivers of qi flow through the upper torso, arms, and legs; springs of qi sprout at the wrists and ankles; and wells of qi are found in the fingers and toes. In both nature and the body, even a small spot in this structure can thus influence the whole, so that overall balance and smoothness are the general goal.

Seen in its most general terms, human life is the accumulation of qi; death is its dispersal. After receiving a core potential of primordial and prenatal qi at birth, people throughout life need to sustain it. They do so by drawing postnatal qi into the body from air and food, as well as from other people through sexual, emotional, and social interaction. But they also lose qi through breathing bad air, living in polluted areas, overburdening or diminishing their bodies with food and drink, or getting involved in negative emotions and excessive sexual or social interaction. Health and long life come through working with qi to the best of one’s ability, attaining a state of perfect balance, utmost harmony, and complete self-fulfillment.

Rather than the mere absence of symptoms and ailments, health in this vision is thus a fundamental alignment with the Dao as it manifests in one’s personal physical and psychological characteristics and as it opens paths to higher self-realization and spiritual unfolding. It means the presence of a strong vital energy and of a smooth, harmonious, and active qi-flow that moves in a steady alteration of yin and yang, two aspects of the continuous flow of creation: the rising and falling, growing and declining, warming and cooling, beginning and ending, expanding and contracting movements that pervade all life and nature. Yin and yang continuously alternate and change from one into the other. They do so in a steady rhythm of rising and falling, visible in nature in the rising and setting of the sun, the warming and cooling of the seasons, the growth and decline of living beings.

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2. There are many works that discuss qi and its nature, mostly in Chinese medicine. Examples include Porkert 1974, Reid 1989, Johnson 2000, Kaptchuk 2000. For a more detailed outline of the Chinese energy and body system, see Kohn 2005. The latter forms the basis of the following presentation.
Phases and Energy Channels

This flow of qi in undulating waves is further systematized into a system of the so-called five phases (*wuxing* 五行), which are in turn symbolized by five material objects: minor yang is symbolized by wood; major yang, fire; yin-yang, earth; minor yin, metal; and major yin, water. These five continue to produce each other in a harmonious cycle in the order presented here. Qi that flows in this order and in the right amount is known as *zhengqi* 正气 or “proper qi.” In addition to personal health, this is also manifest by harmony in nature, defined as regular weather patterns and the absence of disasters, and as health in society, the peaceful coexistence among families, clans, villages, and states. This harmony on all levels, the cosmic presence of a steady and pleasant flow of qi, is what the Chinese call the state of Great Peace (*taiping* 太平), a state venerated by Confucians and Daoists alike.

The opposite of *zhengqi* is *xieqi* 劣气 or “wayward qi,” qi that has lost the harmonious pattern of flow and no longer supports the dynamic forces of change. Xieqi is disorderly and dysfunctional, and creates change that violates the normal order. When it becomes dominant, the qi-flow can turn upon itself and deplete the body’s resources. Thus, any sick person, decimated forest, or intrusive construction no longer operates as part of a universal system and is not in tune with the basic life force.

Whether proper or wayward, qi flows through and animates all the different systems of the human body, which are not classified according to skeletal, muscular, or hormonal, but in terms of yin organs that store qi and center the body’s functioning; yang organs that move qi and take care of digestion and respiration; body fluids that moisturize the body including the lymph and sweat glands; building blocks that make the body come together; senses that connect it to the outside world; emotions that characterize negative reactions to the world; and virtues that enhance positive attitudes.

The full inner-body correspondence system is shown in table 1. The same system of the five phases also connects the body to the outside world, to the seasons, directions, colors, and other aspects of nature, creating a complex network of energetic pathways that work closely together and are intimately interconnected.

Within the body, moreover, the organs are the key storage and transforma-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Yin organ</th>
<th>Yang organ</th>
<th>Body fluid</th>
<th>Building block</th>
<th>Sense</th>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Virtue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wood</td>
<td>liver</td>
<td>gallbladder</td>
<td>tears</td>
<td>joints</td>
<td>vision</td>
<td>anger</td>
<td>benevolence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fire</td>
<td>heart</td>
<td>small intestine</td>
<td>sweat</td>
<td>blood vessels</td>
<td>touch</td>
<td>agitation</td>
<td>propriety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>earth</td>
<td>spleen</td>
<td>stomach</td>
<td>oral mucus</td>
<td>muscles</td>
<td>taste</td>
<td>worry</td>
<td>honesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metal</td>
<td>lungs</td>
<td>large intestine</td>
<td>nasal mucus</td>
<td>skin</td>
<td>smell</td>
<td>sadness</td>
<td>righteousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>water</td>
<td>kidneys</td>
<td>bladder</td>
<td>saliva</td>
<td>bones</td>
<td>hearing</td>
<td>fear</td>
<td>wisdom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
tion centers of qi. They connect to the extremities through a network of energy channels called meridians. There are twelve main meridians that run on both sides of the body. They include ten channels centered on the five yin and five yang organs, plus two added for symmetry: the Triple Heater (yang), a digestive organ that combines the qi from food and from air and transports it to the heart; and the pericardium (yin), a supplementary organ to the heart.

There are also eight extraordinary vessels that run along only one line in the body. They are considered primary and more elemental than the twelve matching channels, carrying a deeper blueprint of the human being and connecting us more intimately to the cosmic course. They include four lines that run along the arms and legs, supporting the basic yin and yang structure of the body, plus two that create a cross inside the torso: the Belt Vessel (daimai 帶脈), which encircles the waist horizontally, and the Penetrating Vessel (chongmai 沖脈), which runs vertically straight through our center from the head to the pelvic floor. The remaining two extraordinary vessels are the Governing Vessel (dumai 督脈; yang) and the Conception Vessel (renmai 任脈; yin), which run along the back and front of the torso, both originating near the base of the spine and ending around the mouth. They form an essential energy circuit along the torso and are used both in medical and meditative body cultivation.

Organs and, through them, the qi-flow of the body are accessed through points along the channels where the energy line comes closest to the surface of the body, the so-called acupuncture points. Each channel has a certain number of points, the longest being the Bladder meridian, which runs through several parallel lines along the back of the body. The points are stimulated with needles in acupuncture, with the burning of mugwort (Artemisia vulgaris) in moxibustion or cautery, and with the fingers in acupressure and Anmo massage. The overall qi-flow in the channels, moreover, is subject to the action of the longevity techniques: it can be regulated with food and herbs in dietary techniques, with respiration in controlled breathing practice, with body movements in healing exercises, and with the mind in meditation.

The Mind

The mind in this system is another aspect of qi, albeit one that vibrates at a much subtler level. As a result, medical and Daoist texts do not show a separation of mental from bodily symptoms but take both as indications of disharmony. According to them, the word “mind” (xin 心) has two meanings: it is a general term for all the various aspects of consciousness and mental activity, in which sense it is close to spirit (shen 神); and it is also a more specific term for the evaluation of the world in terms of good and bad, likes and dislikes, based on sensory stimuli, emotions, and
classificatory schemes. In both forms it is closely linked with the inner organ of the heart, also called xin, and represents different aspects of consciousness—one evaluative and critical, essential for day-to-day survival in the ordinary world, the other flowing smoothly and open to all stimuli, the manifestation of the Dao within.

In a more subtle analysis, moreover, the mind, as outlined in the medical classic *Huangdi neijing* (Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic), divides into five different forms, associated with the five inner organs:

Blood is stored in the liver—the residence of the spirit soul.
Constructive energy is stored in the spleen—the residence of the intention.
The pulse is stored in the heart—the residence of the spirit.
Qi is stored in the lungs—the residence of the material soul.
Essence is stored in the kidneys—the residence of the will. (*Huangdi neijing suwen*, ch. 2)

Each inner organ, therefore, has its own particular body fluid or form of qi and also its specific mental or psychological energy. They each transform and mutate into one another, according to the cycle of the five phases (Ishida 1989, 59). As waves of the various energetic fluids move around the body, so the different aspects of the mind flow along all its parts, creating an integrated network of consciousness.3

The body-mind in Chinese culture, therefore, is an integrated energetic organism that consists of dynamic flows of qi at various levels of subtlety and is represented metaphorically as a system of waterways and undulating channels. The body is a microcosm of the universe: it reflects the landscape of the planet and is the home of celestial entities and starry palaces. Whatever we do in our bodies is accordingly never isolated from the rest of the world, and the world is part of who we are. Cultivating the body thus creates strong life in the person, harmony in society, and great potential for spiritual unfolding. As much as taking care of the body empowers the self, it also enhances the universal Dao—to the point where some Daoist thinkers see body cultivation as the foremost condition for ruling the empire.4

Longevity

The body being originally part of the Dao, the Chinese claim that it should be healthy and strong and function perfectly to the completion of the natural human

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3. For more on Chinese body-mind concepts, see Chiu 1986, Ishida 1989. For a comparison of early Chinese medical thought with that of ancient Greece, see Kuriyama 1999.

4. The most important thinker in this context is Heshang gong, an early Han-dynasty commentator to the *Daode jing*. See Chan 1991.
life span of 120 years. Most people, however, tend to make it only to about half this period, undergoing several phases of body development that occur in an eight-year cycle in males and a seven-year cycle in females. As the *Huangdi neijing* says,

When a girl is 7 years of age, the kidney qi [jing] becomes abundant. She begins to change her teeth and the hair grows longer. At 14, she begins to menstruate and is able to become pregnant. The movement of the great pulse is strong. The menses come regularly, and the girl is able to give birth.

At age 21, the energy is steady, the last tooth has come out, and she is fully grown. When she reaches the age of 28, her tendons and bones are strong, her hair has reached its full length, and her body is flourishing and fertile. At 35, her yang brightness pulse begins to slacken, her face begins to wrinkle, her hair starts falling out.

When she reaches the age of 42, the pulse of the three yang regions deteriorates in the upper part of her body, her entire face is wrinkled, and her hair turns gray. At age 49, she can no longer become pregnant, and the circulation of the great pulse is decreased. Her menstruation is exhausted, and the gates of blood are no longer open. Her body declines, and she is no longer able to bear children. (*Huangdi neijing suwen*, ch. 1; Veith 1972, 99)

The key factor in this development is a form of qi called essence (jing 精). It transforms naturally from primordial qi, stored in the Ocean of Qi (qihai 氣海; abdomen) in men and the Cavern of Qi (qixue 氣穴; chest) in women, through a sinking process that leads to the formation of semen in men and of menstrual blood in women. Both are emitted from the body more or less regularly, leading to the gradual decrease of primordial qi.

According to Daoists and Chinese doctors, it is natural to activate and lose essence regularly, thus coming eventually to physical decline and death. At the same time, it is also possible to regulate and slow down the process by controlling the emission of essence and consciously replenishing qi. They have accordingly developed practices that allow people to retain and strengthen their essence while reverting back to its original form of qi and thus renewing their life and enhancing their health. These practices serve to stimulate the fundamental blueprint of the person stored in the eight extraordinary vessels, to create an openness of flow in the body’s channels and support mental states of stress-free tranquility that ensure continued health and long life.

Known as longevity techniques or methods for nourishing life (yangsheng 養生), these practices were originally part of preventive medicine that helped people recognize and rectify early signs of wayward qi and thus maintain a high level of well-being into extended old age. Undertaken by people on all levels of
Chinese Healing Exercises

Chinese society, they were soon integrated into religious and specifically Daoist regimens and have remained an important part of Chinese life. Longevity techniques work through lifestyle modification in many different ways: diet, herbal remedies, sexual hygiene, deep breathing, physical movements, and mental purification. They are used in various dimensions: to heal people from diseases, to help them maintain health and recover youth, and to assist them in attaining transcendent, spiritual states of immortality.

Levels of Practice

Although the domain of different kinds of practitioners—physicians, longevity masters, and Daoist masters—in traditional Chinese understanding, healing, longevity, and immortality were three stages along the same continuum of the qi-household of the human body. People’s body-mind consists of qi, which functions through the continuous interchange of inborn primordial and prenatal qi, which connects the person to the cosmos, with earthly or postnatal qi, which is taken in through breath, food, and human interaction. The terms of this interchange are thus that primordial qi is lost as and when earthly qi is insufficient, and earthly qi becomes superfluous as and when primordial qi is complete (as in the case of the embryo in the womb).

As people interact with the world on the basis of passions and desires, sensory or sexual exchanges, and intellectual distinctions, they activate their essence and begin to lose their primordial qi. Once they have lost a certain amount, they decline, experience sickness, and eventually die. Healing, then, is the recovery of essence and replenishing of qi with medical means such as drugs, herbs, acupuncture, massage, and so on, from a level of severe deficiency to a more harmonious state.

Longevity comes in as and when people have become aware of their situation and decide to heal themselves. Attaining a basic state of good health, they proceed to increase their primordial qi to and even above the level they had at birth. To do so, they follow specific diets, supplement their food with herbs and minerals, and undertake breath control, healing exercises, self-massages, sexual hygiene, and meditation. These practices not only ensure that people attain their natural life expectancy but also lead to increased old age and vigor.

Immortality raises the practices to a yet higher level. To attain it, people have to transform all their qi into primordial qi and proceed to increasingly refine it to ever subtler levels. This finer qi will eventually turn into pure spirit, with which practitioners increasingly identify to become transcendent spirit-people or immortals (xian). The practice that leads there involves intensive meditation and trance training as well as more radical forms of diet, healing exercises, and the mental guiding of qi. In contrast to health and long life, where the body’s system
remains fundamentally unchanged and is perfected in its original nature, immortality means the overcoming of the natural tendencies of the body and its transformation into a different kind of energetic constellation. The result is a bypassing of death—since the end of the body has no effect on the continuation of the spirit-person—the attainment of magical powers, and residence in the paradises of Penglai or Kunlun.

Practitioners on all three levels, moreover, make use of the same practices but with slight differences. For example, diets on the medical and health levels involve abstention from heavy foods such as meat and fat, as well as from strong substances such as alcohol, garlic, and onions. Instead, practitioners are encouraged to eat small portions of light foods. As their qi increases, they will need less and less food, until—in immortality practice—all main staples can be cut out and food is replaced by the conscious intake of qi through breath. This technique is called “avoiding grain” (bigu) and is still undertaken today.

Similarly, healing exercises as first depicted in Han-dynasty manuscripts serve to stretch and loosen muscles, stimulate the circulation, and aid the smooth flow of qi in the body. They are never strenuous, but change in nature as people proceed from the longevity level to the immortality level, becoming more cosmic in pattern, more counterintuitive, and more internally focused. Similarly, breathing for health and long life involves inhaling all the way to the diaphragm, which expands upon inhalation. Breathing for immortality, on the other hand, is called “reversed breathing,” and uses the diaphragm the opposite way, contracting it on inhalation. The breath may even become imperceptible and be stopped for extended periods, allowing the person to become one with the purer energies within.

Sexual techniques, too, are used on all levels, first with a partner, later celibately and within the practitioner. In all cases, sexual stimulation is experienced, but then the rising qi of arousal (essence) is reverted upward along the spine with the help of meditation and massage instead of being lost through ejaculation or menstruation. This is called “reverting essence to nourish the brain” (huanjing) and is supposed to have strong life-extending effects. In more technical Daoist practice of later centuries, it might even lead to the gestation of an immortal embryo.

In all cases, the same understanding of the fundamentally energetic nature of the human body-mind pervades all three levels and the same practices are used in various forms, depending on whether the goal is health, extended longevity, or complete transcendence of this world.

The Tradition

The various longevity techniques thus form an essential aspect of Chinese culture. Described in a variety of Han-dynasty manuscripts as well as many later texts, in both religious and medical collections, they occupy a middle ground between healing and immortality and can be usefully applied on either level. They can be described as the culmination of healing and the foundation of immortality; they are the ultimate path to perfect health and the entryway to Daoist perfection. Placed between two completely different dimensions yet connected to both, they represent a separate tradition that originally developed as part of preventive and antiaging medicine but were soon adopted by Daoists, who found the practices helpful to open themselves to the higher powers.

Thus, the earliest traces of a more internalized awareness of energies, an important feature of Chinese medicine, appears first in longevity texts (Lo 2000, 22). The first metaphorical nomenclature for parts of the body, essential in Daoist practice, is found in Han-dynasty long-life materials on sexual massage (Lo 2001b, 36). Yet despite its importance historically and in modern life, the longevity tradition neither forms part of mainstream Chinese medicine nor is it originally or even essentially Daoist.

Placed at the intersection of fields, the longevity tradition has rarely been the subject of specialized studies. Only a few dedicated scholars, such as Sakade Yoshinobu, Catherine Despeux, Ute Engelhardt, and Vivienne Lo, have contributed significantly to its understanding, and there are only two edited volumes in English that deal specifically with it (Kohn 1989c, 2006a). It has so far remained largely unrecognized for the powerful impact it had on many aspects of Chinese culture.

It is a major purpose of this book, therefore, to present a preliminary history of the longevity tradition as seen through the lens of healing exercises. This history serves two purposes: raising academic awareness of the tradition and thereby encouraging further forays into this field, and providing practitioners with a documented history that provides depth and cultural context to their practice. The following chapters accordingly present the worldview and practice of healing exercises in a chronological survey, beginning with medical manuscripts from the second century B.C.E.; moving on through the fourth century, when the practices were first integrated into Daoist practice, and the Tang dynasty, when they formed an important step in the formal attainment of immortality; to late imperial and modern China, when patterns emerged that are still prevalent today. In all cases the book places the exercises into the social context of the different periods, asking who their practitioners were and what kind of lifestyle they sought to realize.

Before we embark on the detailed history, however, let us briefly look at the
nature and background of Chinese healing exercises and examine comparative systems that aid in our better understanding of their workings.

**Healing Exercises**

Chinese healing exercises are traditionally called Daoyin 道引. According to the Web site of the Chinese Olympic Committee, this indicates “a form of calisthenic exercise that combines breathing with body movements mimicking animals. Dao means to regulate qi or vital energy by guiding its flow in the body. Yin means to limber up the body and limbs through physical movement” (“Daoyin: An Ancient Way of Preserving Life”; http://en.olympic.cn).

Indeed, the term dao essentially means “to guide” or “to direct,” and appears originally in a political and cultural context in the sense of “leading” the people in a certain direction. The character consists of two parts, the word Dao 道 for “way,” which is often also used in the sense of “to guide,” and the word cun 寸 for “inch,” which indicates a small distance. Guiding the qi in a concrete, physical way means thus that one makes a conscious effort to establish harmony with the Dao in the body, realizing the inherent polarity of yin and yang and aligning oneself with the cosmos (Ikai 2003, 34).

The second word of the compound is yin. It originally means “to draw a bow” and indicates the pulling and activating of strength and inner tension as well as the opening of a space between the bow and the string. Often short for daoyin, it can stand for breathing and exercises in general and be used as a generic term for “nourishing life.” Yin may mean to limber up muscles, release joints, or stretch limbs (Ikai 2003, 33). The earliest manuscripts on healing exercises consistently use yin in a general sense for daoyin, meaning the practice of exercises.

More technically, the texts apply the term yin in conjunction with a pain or a problem, meaning “to pull out [the pain]” or “to release,” as for example in “releasing blockages” or “releasing yin.” This reflects the idea that one can pull the qi out from an ailing part and move it either to or from a specific area in the body. Stretching, another classical translation of yin, is one way of doing this. In this sense the term is applied most commonly when used as a supplement to descriptive or fanciful names, such as Eight Extraordinary Vessels Stretch or Tiger Stretch. In addition, yin may also indicate the stimulation of a certain meridian.

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6. A common English translation for Daoyin traditionally has been “gymnastics” (Kohn 2005, 177), a term that matches words used in French and German. However, while the term in these languages indicates a general physical workout that can range from highly acrobatic to very mild, in English “gymnastics” tends to invoke images of superior feats and Olympic training. To avoid this image, daoyin in this work has been rendered “healing exercises.”
or yin-yang aspect of the body and the enhancement of qi in certain places. Translation of yin accordingly varies among “healing exercises,” “stretch,” “stimulate,” “release,” and “relieve” (Engelhardt 2001, 217).

Taken together, Daoyin is a physical exercise practice that purports to drive all evil out of the body. As the seventh-century medical handbook Zhubing yuanhou lun 諸病源候論 (Origins and Symptoms of Medical Disorders) says: “The practice consists of drawing together in one’s body all the bad, the pathogenic, and the malevolent forms of qi. Then one follows them, pulls them in, and guides them to leave forever. This is why it is called Daoyin” (22.1512; Despeux 1989, 239).

The Practice

More specifically, Daoyin involves gentle movements of the body in all kinds of different positions together with deep breathing and the focused mental guiding of qi around the channels. The oldest sources, manuscripts from the early Han dynasty (ca. 200 B.C.E.), tend to describe a large range of standing moves with only few seated and lying poses. After that, the most common posture for Daoyin is kneeling with heels tucked under the buttocks. This was the proper and most formal way of sitting in ancient China, where chairs were only gradually introduced from Central Asia under the influence of Buddhism (see FitzGerald 1965, Holzman 1967).

In addition to the cross-legged way of sitting on the floor, Buddhism also brought the first seating furniture, a folding chair or camp stool, known initially as the barbarian chair (huchuang 胡床; Kieschnick 2003, 231). It was soon superseded by the corded chair (shengchuang 紜床), a flat, low meditation chair with a simple back that allowed the legs to stretch. However, the Chinese were so used to being on the floor that they resisted having their legs hang down and used it as a platform for cross-legged sitting (Kieschnick 2003, 237). Chairs in our sense with a proper back only appeared in China from the tenth century onward and did not get used in healing exercises until very recently.

Other basic poses include squatting and sitting with legs straight out forward or spread fan-shaped out to the side. These postures were considered quite rude in traditional China and were associated with demons and exorcism (Kieschnick 2003, 225; Harper 1985b, 467). Their use in healing exercises, aside from opening the hips and strengthening the legs, shows the intentional separation

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7. The text was compiled upon imperial command by Chao Yuanfang et al. and dates to 610. It is the first Chinese medical text to include longevity methods for various diseases, which are classified according to symptoms. See Ding 1993, Despeux and Obringer 1997.
from common social norms and patterns and is indicative of the thrust toward self-realization. Less frequently applied poses are lying on one’s back, side, or belly, although various forms of meditative qi-guiding are executed in this position, including an entire group of practices called “sleep exercises.”

The full range of postures is as follows (Ding 1993, 7):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Posture</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sit or kneel</td>
<td>Sit on buttocks or kneel with either heels or big toes touching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Squat</td>
<td>Crouch down on flat feet with knees outward and thighs wide, buttocks not touching the ground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wide seat</td>
<td>Crouch or sit with legs spread wide, like a winnowing basket.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-legged</td>
<td>Sit with knees bent and slightly raised, thighs and buttocks touching the floor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lotus posture</td>
<td>Sit cross-legged, with feet on opposite thigh, buttocks on the floor; can be executed half or full.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lie down</td>
<td>Lie flat on back using a mat or bed for support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lie on the side</td>
<td>Lie on one side with arms and knees either bent or straight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belly down</td>
<td>Lie flat on the stomach, head turned to one side.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standing</td>
<td>Stand up straight, feet flat on the floor, or maybe lean against a wall for support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tall kneel</td>
<td>Kneel with the tops of feet, thighs, and knees touching the floor, but the torso lifted up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbarian kneel</td>
<td>Kneel as in tall kneel, but with the right knee touching the floor and the left knee upright.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dignified kneel</td>
<td>Kneel with one knee touching the floor, buttocks on right thigh, the other knee upright, spread open from the hips.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lofty pose</td>
<td>Wide-angled kneel, with thighs stretched to the sides.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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8. A further description is found in the Tang dynasty: “If you sit in the lotus posture when it is cold, you will warm up but then your legs will go to sleep. Sit lofty by opening the thighs into a character ɕa position [wide apart]. This will drive out the cold and alleviate the five kinds of piles” (Ishinpō 27).
Ancient Traces

Chinese healing exercises are very old, and references to physical self-cultivation and breathing go back as far as the third century B.C.E., when the ancient Daoist text Zhuangzi (Book of Master Zhuang) has the following:

To huff and puff, exhale and inhale, blow out the old and draw in the new, do the “bear-hang” and the “bird-stretch,” interested only in long life—such are the tastes of the practitioners of Daoyin, the nurturers of the body, Grandfather Peng’s ripe-old-agers. (ch. 15; Graham 1986, 265)

While showing that the practices existed at the time, the text seems cynical about mere physical efforts toward self-perfection. On the other hand, it takes breathing exercises very seriously:

The perfected of old slept without dreaming and woke without worrying. They ate without delighting in the taste and breathed very deep. In fact, the perfected breathe all the way to their heels, unlike ordinary folk who breathe only as far as their throats. Bent and burdened, they gasp out words as if they were retching. Involved deeply with passions and desires, their connection with heaven is shallow indeed. (ch. 6; Watson 1968, 77–78)

The image here is that one who works with these methods has the mind set completely on the Dao and allows the cosmic energy to flow freely all the way to the heels. He or she has gone beyond passions and desires and is liberated from the concerns and worries of ordinary life. Physical bends and stretches pave the way for the internal openness required for such advanced stages.

As for specific practice instructions, the earliest known reference to healing exercises is an inscription on a dodecagonal jade block of the Zhou dynasty that dates from the fourth century B.C.E. The original function of the block remains uncertain (Chen 1982), but the inscription in forty-five characters has been studied by several scholars (Wilhelm 1948; Engelhardt 1996, 19; Li 1993, 320–323). It reads as follows:

To guide the qi, allow it to enter deeply [by inhaling] and collect it [in the mouth]. As it collects, it will expand. Once expanded, it will sink down.

When it sinks down, it comes to rest. After it has come to rest, it becomes stable.

When the qi is stable, it begins to sprout. From sprouting, it begins to grow. As it grows, it can be pulled back upwards. When it is pulled upwards, it reaches the crown of the head.
It then touches above at the crown of the head and below at the base of the spine. Who practices like this will attain long life. Who goes against this will die. (Harper 1998, 126)

This describes a fundamental qi practice commonly undertaken as part of Daoyin from the middle ages onward. People inhale deeply, allow the breath to enter both the chest and the mouth, and in the latter mix it with saliva, another potent form of qi in the body. Moving the tongue around the mouth, they gather the saliva and gain a sense of fullness, then swallow, allowing the qi to sink. They feel it moving deep into the abdomen, where they let it settle in the central area of gravity, known in Chinese medicine as the Ocean of Qi and in Daoism as the cinnabar or elixir field (dantian 丹田). There the qi rests and becomes stable.

As adepts repeat this practice, the qi accumulates and becomes stronger. Eventually it does not remain in the lower abdomen but begins to spread through the body or, as the text says, it “sprouts.” Once this is felt, adepts can consciously guide it upward—a technique that usually involves pushing it down to the pelvic floor and then moving it gradually up along the spine, both in close coordination with deep breathing. Not only like the modern qigong and inner alchemical practice of the Microcosmic Orbit (xiao zhoutian 小周天), this is also the pattern of circulation recommended in the early medical manuscript Maifa 脈法 (Vessel Models) and has a counterpart in breath cultivation verses found in the manuscripts Shiwen 十問 (Ten Questions) and He yinyang 和陰陽 (Harmonizing Yin and Yang) (Harper 1998, 125). Yet another text describes a related practice called the Buttock Pull, a tightening of the pelvic muscles and the perineum:

Rise at dawn, sit upright, straighten the spine, and open the buttocks. Suck in the anus and press it down. This is cultivating qi. When eating and drinking, to relax the buttocks, straighten the spine, suck in the anus, and let the qi pass through. This is moving the fluid. (Harper 1998, 430)

Moving all the way up the back, the energy eventually reaches the top of the head. When the entire passage between the head and the pelvic floor is opened, the Penetrating Vessel is activated, the first energy line in the human embryo, the central channel to connect people to the Dao. With this pervading line open, long life can be attained and one can reach for transcendence.

Classical Patterns

Both the emphasis on breathing and the conscious guiding of qi, often expanded into visualization, play an important part in the entire tradition of
Daoyin. They tend to be combined with specific forms of body movements and stretches that range from simple, repetitive moves, such as lifting and lowering the toes, through semiacrobatic feats, such as hanging head down from a rope, to complex integrated sequences that take the body through various postures and open, lengthen, and vitalize all different parts: muscles and joints, tendons and channels.

A typical Daoyin session should be undertaken during the early morning hours, when the yang-qi of the Sun is on the rise; practitioners should find a quiet, secluded, warm, and clean space where they can be undisturbed for the duration; they should relieve themselves and loosen any restrictive clothing. Then they begin with mental concentration and deep breathing, allowing body and mind to calm and be ready for the practice. Initial formalities may also include the invocation of protective deities or the formal chanting of invocations.

As in Daoist ritual, many Daoyin sessions involve clicking the teeth and beating the heavenly drum (snapping fingers against the back of the head while placing the palms over the ears) to stimulate internal vibrations and connect to the subtler levels of qi. Often self-massages of the face, eyes, and ears accompany the practice, stimulating the qi-flow in these areas; and many times a practice called Dry Wash (today known as Marrow Washing) is recommended; this involves passing the hands over the entire body along the lines of the energy channels, again to stimulate and balance the flow of qi.

The specific needs of the practitioner determine which practices are then chosen. Numerous simple techniques can improve specific areas of the body; they relieve pains, relax tensions, and open qi blockages. Many easy sets warm up and energize the body, moving all the different joints from feet to head, without focusing on specific symptoms or areas of the body. A number of set sequences serve to increase qi-flow and enhance health and long life. Other practices are more internally focused: using very little body movement, they emphasize holding the breath or guiding the qi through the different regions of the body, in some cases visualized in a wide spectrum of colors and as splendid palaces and passageways. Sessions can last from ten or twenty minutes to an hour or more, involving also meditations and ecstatic communications with the gods.

Whatever the case, Daoyin serves to increase practitioners’ internal awareness of health and enhances their urge for balance and harmony, making it easy and even essential to practice an overall moderation that pervades all aspects of life and includes the various other longevity techniques. The practice activates the energy flow in the deep extraordinary vessels and deepens the self-conscious knowledge of how one’s being in the body influences both one’s internal well-being and the level of tension or ease one brings into the family and into the world.
Comparative Practices

While Daoyin is uniquely Chinese, practices in other cultures also engage the body in conjunction with breathing and mental awareness to create greater health and overall harmony in the person. The most obvious comparison is with Indian yoga, widespread and well known in the West; less obvious are matches with contemporary movement therapies that utilize similar moves. They help our understanding of why Daoyin is practiced the way it is practiced, how it affects the body and mind, and why it can be effective for healing and the creation of balance and harmony.

Yoga

The most popular and best known traditional body practice in the West today is yoga, an ancient Indian technique that has spread since the first presentation of Hindu concepts at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. While very similar to Daoyin in its integration of body, breath, and mind as well as in many of its specific moves and postures, in terms of worldview, goals, and history, yoga could not be more different.9

Although yogis, like Daoyin followers, emphasize alignment with the fundamental energies of the cosmos and see the body in energetic terms as consisting of five sheaths (kośa),10 the fundamental worldview and ultimate goal of yoga connect the practitioner to the true self or eternal soul (atman), which is one with the creative power of the universe (brahman). Firm, fixed, permanent, and eternal, this true self is the person’s ultimate identity. Originally one with the deepest transcendent ground of all, human beings have forgotten this identity through their karmic involvement with the world and sensory experiences. Through yoga, the “royal road home,” they can recover the innate stability, wholeness, and permanence of the cosmos within and return to the essential substance of their being (Cope 2000, xiii; Farhi 2003, 7).

The Chinese, in contrast, see all reality as being in constant flux and do not acknowledge the existence of a true, permanent, and stable underlying entity either in oneself or in the universe. They also, in their basic practice of Daoyin—with the exception of some applications in Daoism—avoid references to religious or devotional aspects. In yoga, on the other hand, divine grace and devotion to a

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9. For a more detailed description of yogic worldview, history, and practices in comparison to Daoyin, see Kohn 2006b.
10. The five sheaths are the physical body that is nourished by food; the etheric body that exists through vital energy or prāna; the astral body made up of thoughts and intentions; the causal body consisting of pure intellect and knowledge; and the ultimate bliss body, true self, or atman. See Worthington 1982, 23; Mishra 1987, 49; Cope 2000, 68.
deity are key factors for success, so that and īśvara praṇidhāna, or “refuge in the lord,” is one of the five niyamas, the mental attitudes to be cultivated as the foundation of the practice, which also include purity, contentment, austerity, and self-study. The lord, īśvara, is innate cosmic enlightenment, coessential with the innermost self, the personified power that creates, upholds, and withdraws. Yoga is, therefore, essentially theistic (Eliade 1969, 16).

Matching this fundamental outlook toward the divine versus alignment with nature, Daoyin historically began as a part of preventive medicine and served an aristocratic class within society, while yoga grew from the ancient Indian hermit tradition that “rejected the world as it is and devalued life as ephemeral, anguished, and ultimately illusory” (Eliade 1969, 18). Whereas early documents on Daoyin are clearly dated and contain detailed practical instructions, the earliest documents on yoga are only vaguely dated and in contents tend to be philosophical. They are the Yogasūtras of Patañjali, who may or may not be identical with a well-known Sanskrit grammarian who lived around 300 B.C.E.; the text seems to be later than the Upanishads and early Buddhism and may even have come after the Bhagavad Gita (Worthington 1982, 55). It is divided into four main sections—Yogic Ecstasy, Discipline, Miraculous Powers, and Isolation (Eliade 1969, 12)—and consists of 196 sutras or short half-sentences that are more mnemonic aids than clarifying explanations (Taimni 1975, viii). It does not contain any practical instructions.

Details on yoga poses or asanas only emerge in writing when the hermit practice was adopted by larger segments of the population. This version, called hatha yoga, goes back to a group known as the Nath yogis who flourished in northern India from the tenth century onward. Founded by Goruksanatha, this group placed great emphasis on physical fitness, developed various forms of martial arts, and engaged in psychic experiments. Rather than remain aloof from society, they made attempts at reform, treating women and outcasts as equals and trying to unite Hindus and Buddhists (Worthington 1982, 129).

The main document of the Nath yogis is the Hathayoga pradīpikā (Light on Hatha Yoga), which was compiled in the fifteenth century on the basis of the notes and instructions of earlier masters by Svatmarama Swami. Arranged in five sections, it is written like the Yogasūtras in a series of short instructions that need further personal instruction (Worthington 1982, 129). Yet it is also quite different in that it places greater emphasis on physical and breath cultivation rather than meditation and trance states and in that it describes specific postures and movements, creating the foundation of modern yoga.

In the wake of the Nath yogis, various twentieth-century practitioners formulated yogic systems, experimented with the health benefits of yoga, and adapted the
practiced to modern life. Most important among them is B. K. S. Iyengar. Born in 1918 in a small village in Karnataka, he suffered from various severe illnesses and malnutrition in his youth and, after the death of his father, went first to live with an uncle, then, at age fifteen, with the sister of T. Krishnamacharya, the leader of a yoga school in Mysore. There he trained with much difficulty but persevered and gained health and flexibility. In 1937, he was asked to teach yoga in a school in Pune, where he had to overcome more difficulties, both social and physical.

He gradually became an expert, especially in the medical application of the practice, and his fame spread beyond India when in 1952 he met the violinist Yehudi Menuhin, who arranged for him to teach in other countries. In 1966, he published *Light on Yoga*, which became an instant classic. Patterned in title and structure on the *Hathayoga pradipikā*, it sets the tone for much of modern practice—detailing the exact performance of postures, the breathing patterns associated with them, and the medical and psychological benefits of practice. In 1975 he succeeded in establishing his own school in Pune, which has since become the major training center for Iyengar practitioners. He retired from active teaching in 1984 but still continues to run medical workshops and supervise the education of future teachers. His daughter, Geeta Iyengar, has become the de facto leader of the school.

For our purposes, Iyengar’s work is particularly helpful in that it explains how certain poses and moves in Daoyin affect the body and why they are beneficial for practitioners’ health. It is an important comparative resource for the study of Chinese healing exercises and provides insights into the comparative evaluation of the practices.

**Movement Therapies**

Another important comparative perspective, complete with neurophysiological explanations, is found in modern movement therapies that were developed to counteract the stress response, a ubiquitous hazard to health in modern societies. These therapies serve to loosen tight muscles and create an increased awareness of the inner function of the body as a living organism.

One example is Feldenkrais Therapy, developed by Israeli physicist Moshe Feldenkrais (1904–1984). A student of Asian martial arts, he injured his knee in an accident in 1936 and was told he would never walk again without a limp. He

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11. As a result of this development, yoga practices today are available in three major types: meditative and restful with mostly seated and reclining poses (Restorative Yoga, Yin Yoga, Acu-Yoga); moderately strenuous with poses in all body postures and a strong emphasis on alignment and holding (Iyengar, Kripalu, Forrest, Viniyoga); and serious workouts undertaken in a flow of poses (*vinyāsas*), working all major muscle groups in the body (Ashtanga, Bikram, Baptiste, Power Yoga). For an overview of the various schools of yoga, see McCall 2007, 102–114.
refused to listen to medical advice and cured himself by consciously noting what helped and by giving appropriate exercise and rest to his body, learning new ways of movement and the importance of close awareness in the process. As a result, he developed a new system of body integration, documented in his book Body and Mature Behavior (1949; see also Feldenkrais 1972).

In his wake, Thomas Hanna (1928–1990), a philosophy professor turned healer, created Hanna Somatics, a system of easy bends and stretches that relieves core muscles most likely to be stiff in modern people (Knaster 1989, 47–48). His starting point is to see people as conscious, self-regulating beings whose bodies are not outside them but are perceived and regulated from within. He calls this kind of body by the Greek word “soma” and defines it as a constantly flowing array of sensing and actions that occur in the experience of each of us. In contrast to the fact that everyone is equipped with a soma, people today suffer from proprioceptive illiteracy: they focus only on the external world and take the body out of the self (Hanna 1988).

His key concept to describe this proprioceptive illiteracy is “sensory-motor amnesia” (SMA), which means that people through years of stress-induced muscular contractions have forgotten how it feels to be relaxed (Hanna 1990, 7). The ability to control a certain muscle group is surrendered to subcortical reflexes and becomes automatic in the worst possible way. As a result, people live with chronically contracted muscles at 10, 30, or even 60 percent. These muscles become sore and painful, tense with constant exertion, and too strong for their own good. They cause clumsiness, represent a continuous energy drain, and create postural distortions such as scoliosis (sideward spinal leaning), swayback, hunchback, or flat back (with protruding belly).

Physicians, faced with an epidemic of lower back pain, headaches, muscle tension, and heart disease, have no good explanation and no cure. They prescribe painkillers and other symptomatic remedies—at worst suggesting surgery to replace joints—calling the syndrome “regional muscular illness” and putting it down to the “natural” effects of aging (Hanna 1990, 8).

Hanna, then, distinguishes three major reflexes that tend to lead to sensory-motor amnesia:

The Red Light Reflex, also known as the Startle Reflex. A stress response, it works through abdominal contraction and shallow breathing. It says “Stop!” and halts all body activity.

The Green Light Reflex, also called the Landau Reflex. An arousal response, it activates the lower back muscles. It says “Go!” and sets the body up for action.

The Trauma Reflex. A reaction of cringing and pain avoidance, it affects the sides and the waist. Often originally caused by an accident or operation, it says “No!” to pain and causes the body to remain in a twisted, tense state (Hanna 1988; 1990, 8).
To alleviate the effects of these reflexes, Hanna Somatics works with simple bends, stretches, and twists that change the way the brain processes movement and that in many cases are similar to Daoyin moves. Disagreeing with the popular practice of intense stretches, Hanna finds that actively stretching a chronically tight muscle only makes it tighten further. He thus encourages conscious contraction in combination with slow, deep breathing; a deep, conscious awareness; and a very, very slow release—thus teaching the muscle that it can actually let go. The key to all this is, as he says, “our sensory-motor ability to control ourselves. I can contract here, I can release here. As I relax those muscles, what do I feel? I feel a flowing movement right down my body. I am creating that ability to relax and I open up” (Knaster 1989, 53).

Beyond the relief of back pain and various ailments, the ultimate goal of Hanna’s system—not unlike the Chinese tendency to expand health practices into longevity and immortality—is the freedom, independence, and autonomy of the individual as described in his book Bodies in Revolt (1970). He sees body cultivation as a major way for people to become totally autonomous—self-determining, self-balancing, self-healing, self-regulating, self-correcting—not only physically but psychologically and in life in general. He also says—again in agreement with traditional Chinese practitioners—that aging is a myth; in fact, his most basic series of audio cassettes is called “The Myth of Aging.” For him, the typical signs of aging are nothing but the effect of long-term muscular tension, forced immobility, and the resulting sensory-motor amnesia and proprioceptive illiteracy. They are learned responses and they can be unlearned, and he himself has brought about some amazing “cures” just by teaching people to be in their bodies more effectively. His work on the deeper understanding of the production and effects of stress in the body and the importance of becoming self-determining through internal awareness thus brings another comparative explanation to our understanding of Daoyin.

**Theoretical Perspectives**

Beyond contemporary practices that bear a distinct similarity to Daoyin and serve to place its methods into a comparative context, there are also several areas in which modern concepts and scientific analysis help one to see the practice in a more actual and relevant context. I will focus here on three: the modern understanding of breathing and its importance for health and well-being; the new advances in physics, biology, and other natural sciences that have led to the establishment of a new branch of science called energy medicine; and the use of simple exercises and self-massages as well as tapping protocols based on acupuncture channels in the emerging field of energy psychology.
Breathing

Breathing is a key function in the maintenance of the body, and it is also closely correlated with the mind. Typically, any tension, mental or physical, results in a short and shallow breath; any relaxation tends to make it longer and deeper—and vice versa: if one intentionally breathes shallowly, one gets tenser and more nervous; if one consciously breathes more deeply and slows the respiration down, one becomes more relaxed.

Breathing is closely connected with the autonomic nervous system, which has two branches: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic. The sympathetic nervous system is the energizing part. It puts people into a state of readiness to meet challenges or danger, causing nerve endings to emit neurotransmitters that stimulate the adrenal glands to secrete powerful hormones (adrenaline) that increase the heartbeat and the rate of breathing. They also influence our digestion, speeding up the metabolic function through increased acid secretion in the stomach. The parasympathetic nervous system, on the other hand, activates neurotransmitters such as acetylcholine that lower the pulse and breathing rate. Its responses are comfort, relaxation, and sleep. Any relaxation method will stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system and thus slow down the breath.12

If the sympathetic nervous system is “on,” the parasympathetic is “off,” and vice versa. Both, moreover, are linked closely with the endocrine system, which manages the hormones that control growth, activity levels, and sexuality. It secretes hormones known as endorphins and encephalins, which modulate reactions to stress and pain, affect moods and appetite, and support abilities of learning and memory. The more one is in the parasympathetic mode, the better the endocrine system can do its work. The same holds also true for the immune system. Failure to relax it efficiently thus causes many stress-related ailments.

Stress activates the sympathetic nervous system in reaction to a perceived threat. The emphasis here is on “perceived.” Originally built into the organism as the “flight or fight” response, this reaction put the body on high alert when primitive man was confronted with a life-threatening situation. It enabled him to marshal all the body’s powers into one focus, to become stronger than usual, more alert, and with higher endurance. Running for his life, he was using every part of the nervous system, increasing the force and the rate of the heart, looking with pupils wide open, and quieting the bladder and the digestive system.

Today, people react to ordinary problems as if they were life threatening. The

mind perceives threats as more dangerous than they are, and people go into high alert. Worse than that, they get used to being in high alert, with its increased adrenaline rush and intense mental capabilities. The moment the high lets off, they obtain some caffeine or similar stimulant to artificially prolong the stressful state. Then, after a day’s work, they find they cannot relax and over the long run become prone to all sorts of ailments.

Every time human beings perceive a situation as stressful, the breathing becomes shallow and short. Modern people, surrounded by situations perceived as stressful, have come to accept shallow chest breathing as the normal state of affairs. They no longer breathe naturally and deeply, filling the lungs all the way and engaging the diaphragm so that the abdomen expands upon inhalation and contracts upon exhalation. Instead, they gasp out air as if they were pushing a heavy load, no longer using the deeper and side parts of the lungs, where the blood-flow rate is faster and the renewal of energy greatest.

Breathing only as deeply as the chest speeds up the breathing process. Instead of ten deep and relaxed breaths per minute, people often take sixteen or more. The heart accordingly beats that much faster; it begins to work overtime and comes to wear out that much sooner. Heart disease and cardiopulmonary conditions are the eventual result. By breathing in this manner, people also prevent sufficient amounts of oxygen from reaching the cells. Instead of exchanging fresh oxygen for old carbon dioxide in the lungs and thereby giving new energy to the system, they release only a little and maintain an unhealthy amount of gaseous toxins within. This in turn causes the blood to become more acidic and tension to build up. The hypothalamus and pituitary glands are stimulated, and stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline are released to further fuel the sense of urgency, tension, and anxiety. Then, of course, breathing becomes even shallower and more rapid. It is a vicious circle that has no escape—until one gets sick and is forced to rest or decide that enough is enough and make some changes.

On the positive side, and strongly encouraged by yogis, movement therapists, and Daoyin practitioners, people can learn to become aware of their breathing and begin to control it. Doing so, they can balance the nervous system and return to a healthier overall constitution. They realize the inherent truth in the key rule about breath and stress: “It is physiologically impossible to breathe deeply and be stressed at the same time.” Gentle body movements in conjunction with deep and slow breathing—as well as the controlled intake, release, and holding of breath—thus form a central pillar of all health practices and appear in a variety of unique forms in Daoyin practice, from the very beginning to its modern adaptations. Modern scientific explanations of the connection of breathing to stress and health thus help us understand why Daoyin adepts do what they do.
**Energy Medicine**

Another modern field that helps our understanding of Daoyin is the emerging trend toward energy medicine. Recent research in biology, physiology, and physics has opened up many new ways of looking at body functions and healing. These branches of science are beginning to create a language that will eventually allow Western science to integrate Chinese concepts, demystify the phenomenon and experiences of *qi*, and make Asian perspectives more widely accessible to the general public.

The most important new concepts emerging from this research are measurable biomagnetic fields and bioelectricity. Biomagnetic fields are human energy centers that vibrate at different frequencies, storing and giving off energies not unlike the inner organs in the Chinese system. Their energetic output or vibrations can be measured, and it has been shown that the heart and the brain continuously pulse at extremely low frequencies (ELF). It has also become clear through controlled measurements that biomagnetic fields are unbounded so that, for example, the field of the heart vibrates beyond the body and extends infinitely into space, verifying the Chinese conviction that people and the universe interact continuously on an energetic level.¹³

Similarly, bioelectricity manifests in energy currents that crisscross the human body and are similar to the meridians of acupuncture. Separate from and, in evolutionary terms, more ancient than the nervous system, these currents work through the so-called cytoskeleton, a complex net of connective tissue that is a continuous and dynamic molecular webwork. Also known as the “living matrix,” this webwork contains so-called integrins or transmembrane linking molecules that have no boundaries but are intricately interconnected. When touching the skin or inserting an acupuncture needle, the integrins make contact with all parts of the body through the matrix webwork. Given this evidence, wholeness, which sees “the body as an integrated, coordinated, successful system” and accepts that “no parts or properties are uncorrelated but all are demonstrably linked” (Oschman 2000, 49, citing E. F. Adolph), is becoming an accepted concept.

The body as a living matrix is simultaneously a mechanical, vibrational, energetic, electronic, photonic, and informational network. It consists of a complex, linked pattern of pathways and molecules that forms a tensegrity system. A term taken originally from architecture, where it is used in the structural description of domes, tents, sailing vessels, and cranes, “tensegrity” indicates a continuous tensional network (tendons) connected by a set of discontinuous elements (struts), which can also be fruitfully applied to the description of the wholeness of the body:

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The body as a whole, and the spine in particular, can usefully be described as tenseg- rity systems. In the body, bones act as discontinuous compression elements and the muscles, tendons and ligaments act as a continuous tensional system. Together the bones and tensional elements permit the body to change shape, move about, and lift objects. (Oschman 2000, 153)

Similarly, from the perspective of quantum physics, the body is constantly vibrating and forms part of a universal pattern. The muscles and flesh are made of highly ordered, crystalline material consisting of tiny atoms vibrating in groups along coiled molecules. The patterns are constant, rapid, and orderly. When subjected to the influence of a magnet or a needle, the field is modified and the whole pattern changes. The same also holds true for bones, which consist of vibrating patterns and changing energy fields—dissolving into the nothingness of pure oscillation when observed closely under the microscope.

The mind, too, is essentially the same as the body. There is no separation of consciousness from physical existence. Both are energy fields; they just vibrate at different speeds: \(10^{22}\) Hz for the atomic nucleus, \(10^{15}\) for the atom itself, \(10^9\) for molecules, and \(10^4\) for cells. Sensations in the body accordingly do not come from specific sense organs but arise through the fluctuation of different vibratory fields—all of which are immediately linked with consciousness in a nonlocal way and, in fact, are consciousness.\(^{14}\)

Mental and emotional states thus form part of the larger picture of the body, so that intention becomes a kind of directed vibration that can have a disturbing or enhancing effect on health. Mental attitudes give rise to specific patterns of energy so that magnetic activity in the nervous system of the individual can spread through his or her body into the energy fields and bodies of others. This understanding can account for the efficacy of therapeutic touch and distant energy healing, during which the practitioner goes into a meditative state of mind and directs healing thoughts toward the patient. Measuring experiments have shown that we all emit energies through our bodies and into our auras; the field emanating from the hands of a skilled practitioner, moreover, is very strong, sometimes reaching a million times the strength of the normal brain field. It can, moreover, contain infrared radiation, creating heat and spreading light as part of the healing effort.

The vision of the body as an energetic network and of the mind as a key factor in body energetics, a key concept in Chinese medicine and at the root of all Daoyin practices, is not as alien to Westerners as one might think at first. Without specifi-

ally speaking of yin and yang, the five phases, and a network of acupuncture channels, modern science is yet adapting an understanding of body and self that has been at the root of Chinese traditional practices for millennia. As science verifies energetic patterns with modern technology and precise measurements, it helps translate the ancient systems into a contemporary understanding.

**Energy Psychology**

A different modern development along the same lines that makes more conscious and active use of Chinese energy patterns is the evolving field of energy psychology. It sees the body as consisting of “various interrelated energy systems (such as the aura, chakras, and meridians), which each serve specific functions” (Feinstein, Eden, and Craig 2005, 197). According to this understanding, the visible and measurable material body is supported by an underlying network or skeleton of living energy that forms the foundation of all bodily systems.\(^{15}\)

Supported increasingly by electromagnetic measurements, followers of this new method distinguish eight major aspects of this energy network:

1. the meridian system, defined as the energy bloodstream, which “brings vitality, removes blockages, adjusts metabolism, and even determines the speed and form of cellular change” (Feinstein, Eden, and Craig 2005, 198)
2. the chakras, energetic vortexes adapted from Indian body geography, which are concentrated centers of energy that supply power to specific organs and resonate with universal principles, such as creativity, love, survival, and transcendence (200)
3. the aura, a fundamental energy shield surrounding people that was studied extensively in the seventies [e.g., Krippner and Rubin 1974] and that is now seen as a protective energetic atmosphere that surrounds the person “like a space suit” and serves to filter outside energies (Feinstein, Eden, and Craig, 2005, 200)
4. the basic grid, a sturdy fundamental energy net that can be compared to the chassis of a car (201)
5. the celtic weave, a spinning, spiraling, twisting, and curving pattern of energies that creates a “kaleidoscope of colors and shapes” and functions as an “invisible thread that keeps all the energy systems functioning as a single unit” (201)
6. the five rhythms, matching the five phases and their related organs, senses, muscles, and so on, which establish a person’s primary rhythm and provide the basic blueprint of personal and interactive functioning (202)
7. the triple warmer, adapted from Chinese medicine and reinterpreted as an en-

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\(^{15}\) Other, earlier works on energy psychology include Pert 1997, Gallo 2004, and Gach and Henning 2004.
nergy line that “networks the energies of the immune system to attack an invader and mobilizes the body’s energies in emergencies,” which is the key factor in the stress response according to this energetic vision (202)

8. the radiant circuits, an adaptation of the eight extraordinary vessels, now described as primary to the body’s system in terms of evolution, “operating like fluid fields and embodying a distinct spontaneous intelligence” (203)

On the basis of this vision of the human body, practitioners of energy psychology propose that people should enhance their “energy aptitude,” perform daily exercises to harmonize the energies, and use specific tapping techniques to release tensions, emotional trauma, and even physical ailments.

Energy aptitude means the ability to work effectively with one’s internal energies. It has four components: a fundamental, careful awareness of one’s energetic patterns, the ability to influence these patterns in a beneficial way, the faculty to perceive energies in other people and outside objects, and the ability to join or transform these outside energies in a beneficial way (Feinstein, Eden, and Craig 2005, 204–205).

Daily exercises include many moves familiar from qigong and already used in Daoyin; they involve pressing key acupuncture points while breathing deeply and visualizing energies flowing through the body. Like Daoyin exercises, they make use of various bodily postures and involve self-massages of key areas, such as the face, the scalp, and the abdomen. In some cases, meridian lines are opened through placing the hands at either end and allowing the energies to flow; in others cases, simple bends or stretches in conjunction with conscious breathing and mental release serve the purpose. While these are all similar to practices already advocated in Daoyin, the closest exercise is the Auric Weave, a passing of the hands over the energy lines of the body, which is known as Dry Wash in traditional Daoyin and practiced as Marrow Washing in modern qigong (Feinstein, Eden, and Craig 2005, 233–235). From this perspective of energy psychology, it becomes clear just to what degree Chinese healing exercises work with the underlying energy patterns of the body, above and beyond limbering up muscles and opening joints.

The third and most important clinical application of energy psychology lies in tapping techniques that ease stress, release trauma, and heal ailments. Also known as EFT or emotional freedom technique, the method has patients measure a problem on a scale from 1 to 10, then imagine the feeling associated with the issue, create a positive affirmation (“Even though I have ——, I deeply and completely accept myself”), and repeat the affirmation while tapping a set of eight acupuncture points. The points range from the center of the forehead through the face, neck, and upper torso to the sides of the hands. After completion,
patients remeasure the feeling, then repeat the technique—often with a slightly modified affirmation (“Even though I still have a remnant of ——”)—until it goes down to zero. Not only are urgent issues immediately relieved with this method, but even long-standing issues are resolved with persistent tapping.

The technique in this form is not obviously documented in traditional Chinese texts, but there is a Daoist method practiced today that involves tapping the three cinnabar fields and the third eye while chanting an incantation to the powers of chaos underlying all creation.¹⁶ There are also multiple qigong tapping routines that help recover health and stabilize energy (Johnson 2000, 703–707). Within Daoyin, moreover, time and again practitioners are asked to “drum” (鼓) certain areas of the body, most commonly the chest or abdomen, while holding the breath, thereby releasing stale or wayward qi, the traditional way of referring to past trauma, unwanted emotional baggage, and physical obstructions. Self-massages that involve tapping energy channels on arms and legs as well as around eyes and ears, moreover, are very common and considered essential to healing, long life, and the development of the subtle energy body necessary for transcendence.

Daoyin, therefore, while ancient in its origins and deeply embedded in a traditional Chinese culture, in both concepts and practice has relevant counterparts in modern Western science and psychology, has much to offer in terms of stress reduction, and can be best understood in comparison with yoga and contemporary movement therapies. Its full power, however, can be appreciated only by understanding just how it has changed and unfolded over the centuries.

¹⁶. I received this method through personal transmission from J. Michael Wood, who obtained it from Robert Peng, a high-ranking Daoist qigong master, at the National Qigong Association meeting in 2005.