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Connecting With Chi

East Meets West in 'Energy Medicine'

By Margaret Mason
Special to The Washington Post

More than a dozen years ago David Eisenberg's Chinese calligraphy teacher presented him with one bold brush stroke.

"It was the most ancient character for a bird," says Eisenberg. "He gave it to me as a symbol, encouraging me to fly and to be free and to try and let my mind and my sense of wonder explore like a bird."

Fortunately for the rest of us, Eisenberg never has forgotten that gift, nor the giver, Wang Jinhuai, under whom Eisenberg studied calligraphy in 1979-80 as the first American medical student sent by the National Academy of Sciences to the People's Republic of China. They continue to be very close friends.

"A teacher for one day," Eisenberg quotes a proverb, "is like a parent for a lifetime."

"He's a great mentor of mine, about chi [from the word, Qi, for vital energy, pronounced 'chee'], and about balance and about yin and yang and Chinese medicine," says Eisenberg.

"He's an example of a man who really tries to understand the best from ancient and modern culture."

As does Eisenberg. "I am breathing life into a bridge that has been there a long time," he says.

An internist at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, Eisenberg is director of exchange activities between Harvard Medical School (where he is on staff), the Peking Union Medical College and the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences. He also is a member of the ad hoc advisory panel for NIH's Office of Alternative Medicine.

You'll meet him in "The Mystery of Chi," Monday night's first segment of the five-part PBS documentary, "Healing and the Mind With Bill Moyers." I met Eisenberg in his book, "Encounters With Chi," and in several telephone conversations, which helped me grasp some of the profound, yet subtle, differences in Chinese and Western medicine.

In the exchange on film between Eisenberg and his calligraphy teacher, for example, I understood for a moment the Chinese culture premise that healing is not separate from the rest of life, that mind, body and spirit are linked in everything, including art.

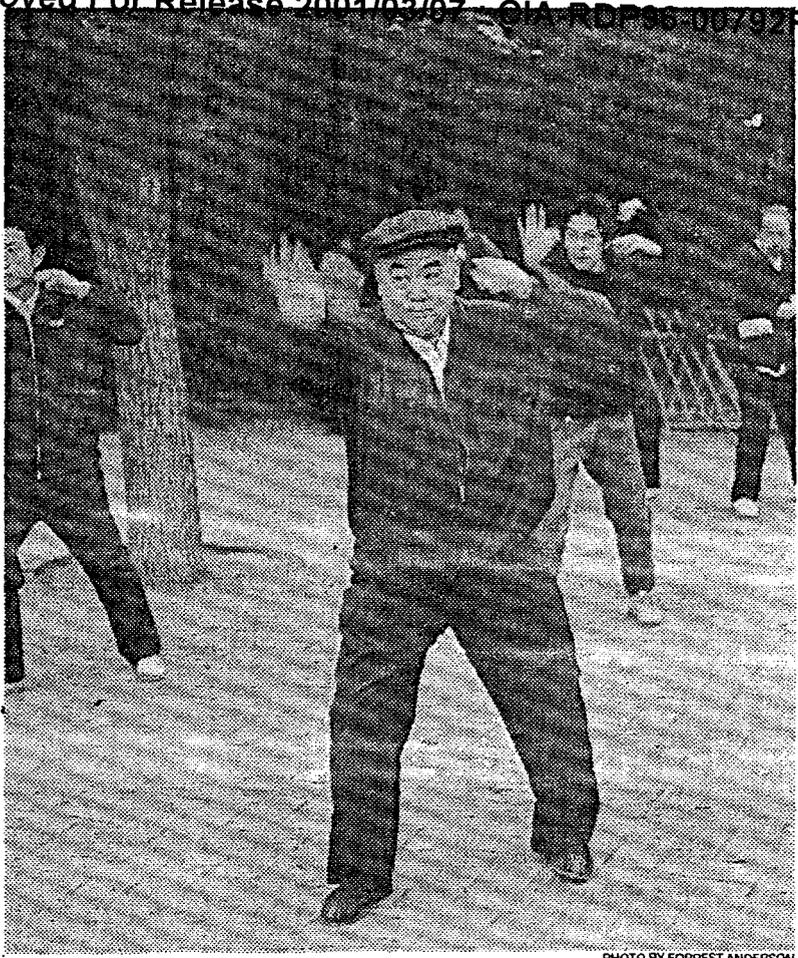


PHOTO BY FORREST ANDERSON

Tai chi ch'uan teacher Master Shir with a class in Beijing.

Thus, the line, "the brush stroke is the man."

But the more I learn, the more I realize that Chinese medicine goes way beyond acupuncture, however dramatic that is. The internal drama—the stuff of "energy medicine" and other ways of tapping into and using our own "chi" for health and healing—is even more compelling.

No wonder Eisenberg keeps re-

turning to China, at once "humbled," a word he uses often, and skeptical. He'd like nothing better than to see more research on the principles of Chinese medicine using Western scientific methodologies.

"The art of healing is thousands of years old," he writes in his book. "The science of healing is still in the process of being born."

But now to get to the part of the

most for me. "In Chinese medicine," says Eisenberg, "there's the idea that the body has to move, and that movement is as important as eating or sleeping or drinking."

The Chinese believe, he says, that if you don't move the body every day, it becomes stagnant. Thus, hundreds of millions of people in China come out every morning at dawn—as they have for 24 centuries—to perform their daily exercises, known as "t'ai chi ch'uan" and "chi gong." Unlike Western aerobics, the movements are slow and careful, combined with meditation.

In northern China, they come at dawn even when there is snow and ice. "In Chinese medicine," says Eisenberg, "the body is a microcosm of the universe, a part of nature, so that as the seasons and temperatures change, people also experience these changes."

And as I think about the serenity on the faces of those old men and women, I learn from the Center for International Research that 15 percent of the world's population of people 80 and over is in China, and from the looks of the PBS film and from what I've read, all of them must be out there moving about at dawn. And then I think about the second highest percentage of 80-and-uppers, the 13 percent from this country. I don't picture most of them moving about in the fresh air at dawn. I picture them banging their canes in a nursing home.

We have a lot to learn from each other.

But to keep things in perspective, consider that 3,000 years before the birth of psychoneuroimmunology—the new interdisciplinary field that is redefining the links between brain and body—Chinese doctors were struggling with the same mind-body relations.

After reading that in Eisenberg's book, I tacked up on my wall still another Chinese proverb:

"Make small progress day by day."

Everyone who watches the Bill Moyers series will come away with a different opinion, depending on their own health, state of mind and exposure to mind/body concepts. But chances are, particularly if the ideas are new, you'll want to talk about them.

Here's a time and place: 7 p.m. March 7, Washington Ethical Society, 7750 16th St. NW.

Elliott S. Dacher, a Reston physician with a long-time personal and professional interest in holistic medicine and author of a book on mind/body healing, will speak. The title of his talk, "The Mind Is the Body; The Body Is the Mind," is borrowed from the Moyers series.

The line—which does get your attention—belongs to molecular biologist Candace Pert, in a segment on chemical communicators. (Pert discovered the opiate receptor and other peptide receptors in the brain and body, which led to an understanding of the chemicals that travel between the mind and body.)

The session, says Dacher, "is a celebration of the series and a chance to explore and discuss how our own experiences relate to this information, and the implications of this information in our lives." After Dacher's talk, participants will break into small discussion groups, each with a trained leader.

The event, sponsored by the Shenandoah Institute, a nonprofit educational organization, is free. To register, which is required, call 703-558-0833.

Gang Photo

the earlier photo. "I want a job, any job," said Tyrone Calvert, a convicted robber. Prichard said he didn't realize until afterward that both stories involved some of

realized something was wrong," said Tallen, who abruptly walked out. The incident was disclosed this week by Roll Call, the Capitol Hill

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