

The Art of Integrated Health

by Lenzie J. Williams

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When we think of health, generally we think in terms of exercise and nutrition, which are the cornerstones of good health and well-being. Other factors that may have different degrees of relevance include our quality of emotional balance and capacity, our mental beliefs and attitudes, and our deeper Source capacity connected to Spiritual and/or Universal Principles.

Our bodies are the most substantial and tangible part of our being, and so represent the foundation through which we build and develop. A famous Tai Chi master once said, "you eat every day, you sleep every day, you should practice Tai Chi every day." This speaks to the importance of exercise. As eating gives you nutrition for revitalization, and sleep gives you rest for regeneration, exercise helps to revitalize, regenerate, and rejuvenate our bodies.

I believe one of the keys to success and perseverance in a particular exercise system (doing the exercise over time to get deeper improvement and development) is to find the right exercise and, in some cases, the right instructor. This can take time, research, and experimentation. In my earlier years, that was a process that I worked through when I approached some systems. However, with Tai Chi my experience was different. I had somehow developed an interest in Internal Martial Arts even though I didn't really know what that was. At a certain point, I focused on the idea that I should study Tai Chi or Akido, and held this idea for a couple of years. Then one day someone in my meditation group mentioned that a Tai Chi class was starting in a couple of weeks. I showed up to see what it was like. That turned out to be the beginning of a relationship with Tai Chi and my extraordinary teacher that has lasted over thirty years. Sometimes it may take work to find the right exercise and the right instructor, and sometimes it seems to just fall into place (though maybe it's the internal soul-searching one has done that makes the "easy" ones seem that way).

In this day and time there are an enormous number of choices and variety of exercise systems to choose from. This is good, at one level, but choice can lead to confusion as well. Start with what you have an interest in, and what is possible. Some exercise systems -- like weight lifting and machine training, jogging, active martial arts, aerobics, and dance -- can be good systems for those who are healthy, young to middle-aged, enjoy a certain level of intensity in training, and have the capacity and/or the willingness to develop long-term discipline.

Somewhere closer to the other end of the spectrum are exercise systems like Tai Chi, Chi Kung, Yoga, and Pilates. These systems are also for the healthy who wish to improve their well-being, but it's immensely important to recognize that these systems are also available to the weak who need to develop strength, the injured who need rehabilitation, and those who seek integration between the exercise system, philosophical concepts, and principles that serve as navigational tools to influence the quality of daily life and direction.

These exercises (often referred to as internal exercise because of their focus on internal organs and internal energy balancing) offer the possibility of participation to people with a wide range of capacities, from limited health to robust. This allows room for the practitioner to develop and cultivate perseverance and discipline over a longer period of time. Due to the nature of internal art healing systems, people are able to practice and develop well into old age, sustained by vitality derived from the exercises themselves.

Once one has found an exercise system, the next thing to consider is nutrition. Every body is different, and that same body changes over time. I believe slow transformation of diet is best and

most lasting. I also believe our bodies give us feedback about what is of service and what is not. We get quite good at ignoring imbalanced diets, and tolerating the consequences. A suggested approach is to carefully take note of what foods severely impact you, those that moderately impact you, and those that your body feels good about. Over time, start to reduce the frequency and amount of the negatively impactful foods, and increase the beneficial foods. You'll be amazed at how your body will begin to support the process. Then spend some time reading, researching, and experimenting. Combining your developed intuitive body sense and external nutritional knowledge, you will be on your way to making diet and nutrition a positively impactful part of your life.

Sometimes people approach exercise and nutrition as a way to gain self- and social esteem, to address issues of inadequacy, and/or to enhance self-value. Often this process is successful as the individual starts to feel competent and accomplished in the exercise system or diet regime. In some cases, if the level of the practice goes down, so does the person's sense of value and self-worth. Our sense of essential value and self-worth are our Gifted inheritance. For most people the process of working through the various experiences of childhood-adolescence-adulthood has impacted, covered over, and in some cases seemingly destroyed that essence-value. Choosing the journey of development and growth we must address our issues of self-love and value for ourselves as well as for others. There can be numerous approaches: group work, counseling, therapy, self-observation and study, sincere soul-searching, and doing things that represent loving and nurturing ourselves. At the center of all great Spiritual teachings is the admonition: "know thyself." So to whatever degree you are capable, be of service to yourself by loving and knowing yourself.

One other important area of clearing our own house is to address negative self-judgment and judgment of others. Judging ourselves is a way of shrinking, limiting, and invalidating the value and importance of ourselves and others. This process over time can really tax and affect our immune system, and consequently our health. Remember the old Native American adage: unless you've walked a mile in another person's moccasins, you don't have the right to judge that person's process.

As we walk (run, stumble, fall, get stuck, etc.) through life, there come times when all the external ways of managing and trying to figure out life get exhausted. We need to have somewhere to go: to our Higher Self, to religion, to meditation, to some area of spirituality. We need to access some area of faith that empowers us to transcend the limitations imposed by our immediate situation, to "know" the capacity to go beyond where we are -- if not in the present, then at least in the future. This perspective can be invaluable in allowing us to work through the ups and downs of our exercise and diet regimens as we work through barriers and obstacles to self-knowledge and awareness. We are complex Human-Spirit beings. To limit our sense of Health (true well-being) to just exercise and nutrition is to limit the value that can be derived by addressing and developing our capacity to truly be awesome individuals. So travel this path with appreciation and gratitude, happiness and joy, love and compassion, optimism and faith, on your way to integrated health and well-being.

Lenzie J. Williams has studied various physical exercise systems, various consciousness and meditative systems, and health and nutrition systems for over forty years. For the last thirty years he has focused on studying and teaching Tai Chi, a multi-faceted system involving external and internal health, consciousness development, actualized philosophy, self-defense, and Spirituality (as connection with Self and the Highest Universal Principles). Lenzie teaches Tai Chi in Berkeley, California, and gives workshops nationally and internationally. The ABC Workshops (basics of health and life) teach important fundamentals of internal healing arts, meditation, and various other tools to heal and balance our bodies, emotions, minds, and Spirits. Visit <http://www.TaiChiBerkeley.com> or <http://www.TheABCWorkshops.com> for more information.