

Chi Kung

Healthy or Hazardous?

by Thomas J. Nardi, Ph.D.

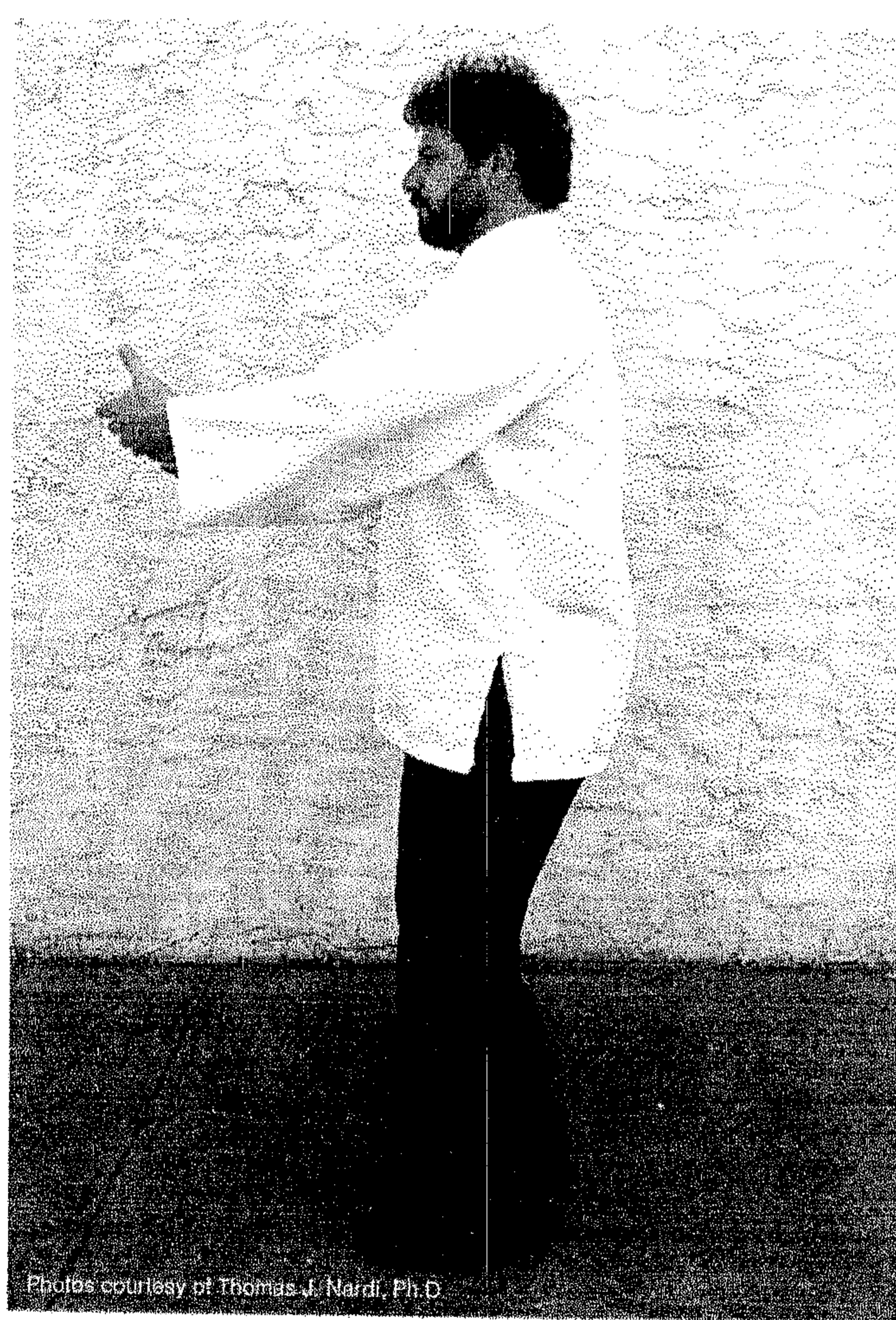
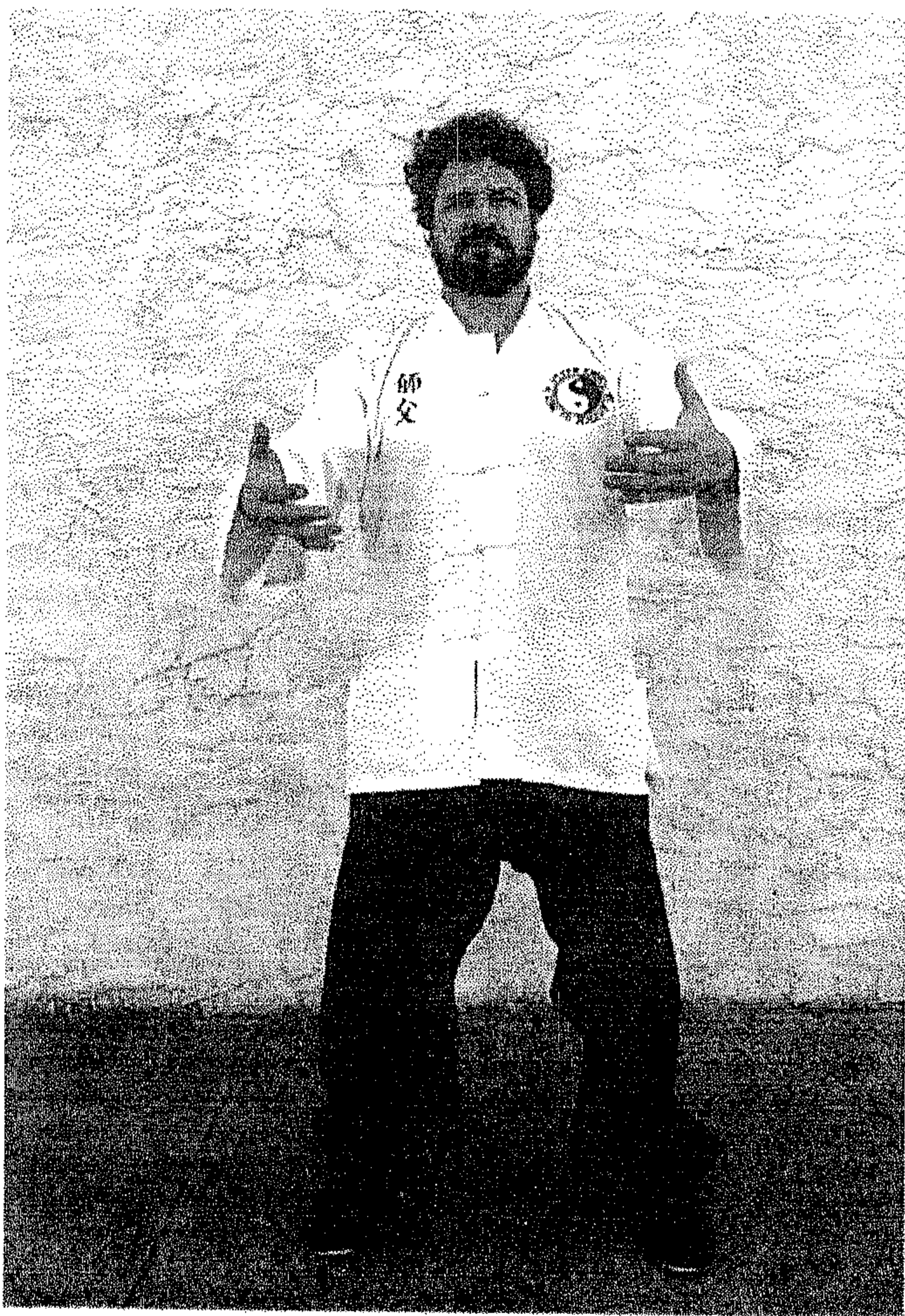
Wait a minute. On one hand, *chi kung* (breath exercise) is a good thing. The purpose of chi kung is to increase, balance or circulate *chi* (energy) in your body. It does this by harmonizing your mind, breath and body. That's good, right?

On the other hand, chi kung reportedly causes hypertension, insomnia, miscarriage, sterility and strokes. Most people would not wish these ailments

on their worst enemies. Chi kung is a 3,000-year-old practice, and it is one of the cornerstones of traditional Chinese medicine. How can it simultaneously be a healthy and a hazardous practice? You're about to find out.

Thousands of Methods

There are literally thousands of different methods



Photos courtesy of Thomas J. Nardi, Ph.D.

武 In the photos above, Randy Elia demonstrates the universal pose. Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and flat on the floor. Your weight should be evenly distributed (left). Tuck your pelvis in, contract your abdominal muscles slightly inward and relax your shoulders. Hold your arms in front of you and bend them slightly. Gaze straight ahead and press your tongue against the roof of your mouth. Breathe slowly, mentally following your breath through your nose and out your palms.

of chi kung. There are passive methods involving meditation and breath control, and active methods which add physical movement to the meditation and breath control. Some methods are designed for health purposes only. Others increase chi for protection and use in martial art applications, such as iron palm or iron vest training. Other methods are designed to assist healing others. In these methods, the chi kung practitioner is reported to be able to transmit chi directly to a patient as a form of medical treatment.

Almost all methods, regardless of their ultimate purpose, involve some form of breath regulation. Sometimes the practice is simply inhaling and exhaling in long, slow breaths. Other methods involve complex breath control.

The Good and the Bad

Recently, Western scientists have documented the medical benefits of some chi kung practices. For example, they found that chi kung has reduced the pain of Reflex Sympathetic Dythrophy (a deterioration of the nervous system). It has also helped those suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome and certain stress-

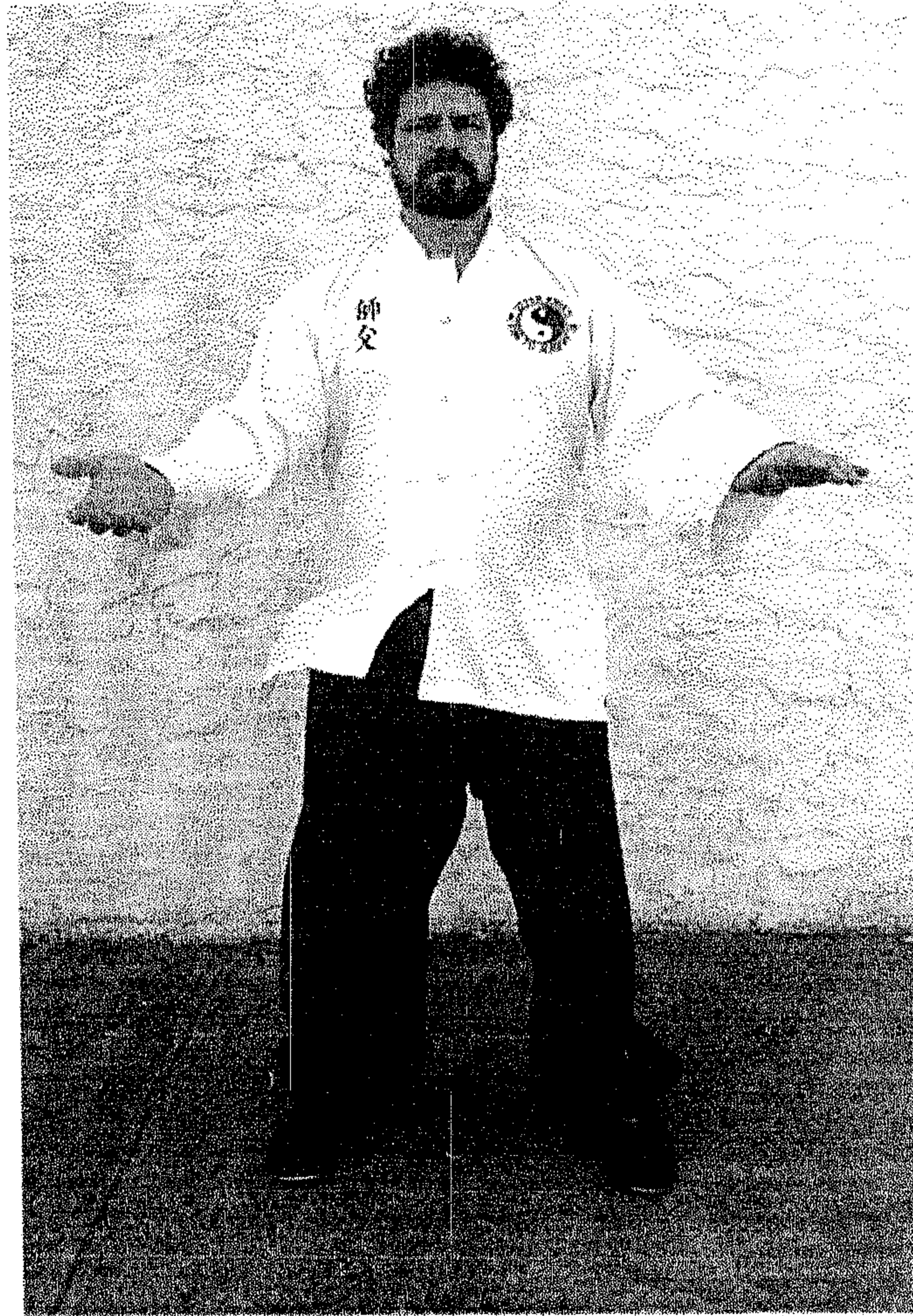
related disorders.

Moreover, traditional Chinese medicine practitioners believe illness results from a disturbance of chi in the body. If the chi is lacking, blocked or stagnated, illness occurs. The purpose of chi kung is to circulate the chi, which can eliminate the illness.

Randy Elia, the director of the Bergen Healing Arts Institute for Massage Therapy and Peter Kwok's Kung Fu Academy in Emerson, New Jersey, has more than 28 years of experience in the healing arts and the martial arts. He advises his massage therapy students to practice chi kung and *tai chi*.

"Chi kung is ideal preparation for massage," he says. "It helps the massage therapist focus his energy, breath and concentration," he says. "I also recommend that my massage students do tai chi to help them learn proper body mechanics. Tai chi helps them move efficiently, maintain good posture and use proper body alignment when performing a massage."

Tai chi, sometimes called Chinese shadow boxing, consists of slow graceful movements. All movements are performed in coordination with the breath. The student strives to create the feeling that his breath,



武 In the above photos, Randy Elia demonstrates the imaginary ball pose. To begin, stand motionless and hold your arms straight out in front of you. Your palms should face down. Eventually, you will feel as if something is pushing against your palms. Sometimes it feels like your palms are on two basketballs that are floating in a pool, says Elia. This is actually the chi, which comes from the earth and moves upward.

not his muscles, is causing the body's movements.

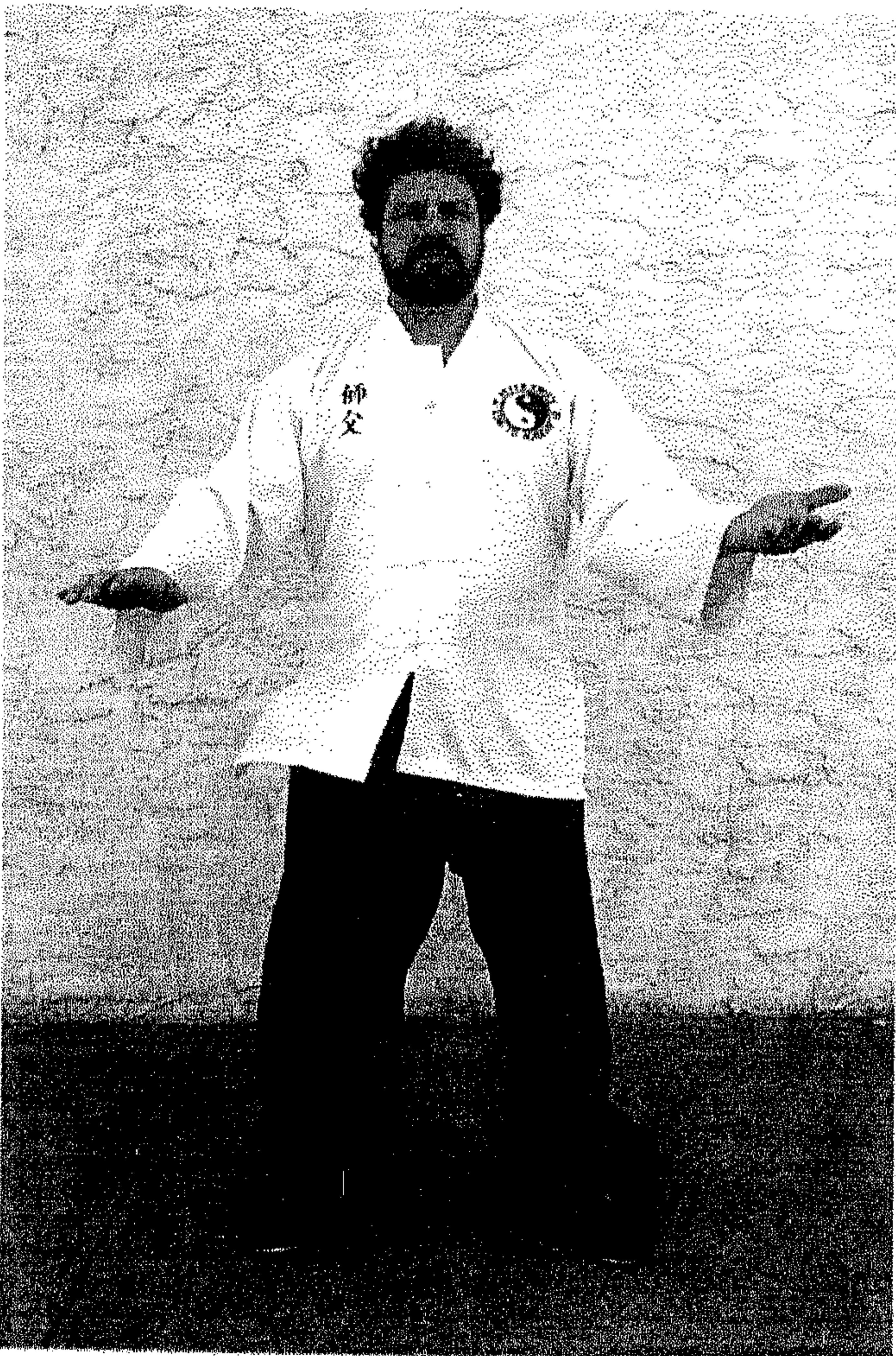
This focus on harmonizing breath and movement requires the use of the mind. It is a person's mind that directs the breath, which in turn directs the movement. Hence, through consistent practice, the mind, body and breath are taught to function in a unified manner. The body and mind benefit equally from the practice of tai chi.

Chi kung practice is not without potential problems, however. As previously mentioned, there can be some very serious side effects associated with some chi kung practices. What's particularly disturbing is that some of these side effects may appear almost immediately while others may result after months or years of practice.

The Root of the Problems

So why is this ancient practice sometimes bad? To begin, the increased interest and popularity of chi kung has produced a number of pseudo-masters and outright charlatans. This sudden appearance of so-called masters is similar to what occurred with other trendy

In the photo below, Randy Elia finishes the imaginary ball pose with another variation.



martial arts fads.

When the TV series *Kung Fu* appeared in the late 1960s, many kung fu "instructors" suddenly appeared on the scene. Many of these people took down their storefront signs that read "Karate" and replaced them with "Kung Fu." It is these incompetent instructors who teach improper chi kung methods. At best, their methods are useless. At worst, they can contribute to serious health problems.

Surprisingly, some legitimate Chinese chi kung practitioners have also created some problems. For example, although a well-known Chinese chi kung master had some impressive credentials, his command of English was poor. Consequently, one of his students misunderstood his directions on how to regulate his breath. As a result, the student's blood pressure shot up seriously high. Not surprisingly, the student assertively refused to continue the practice.

Although the instructor's intentions were good, he never understood the seriousness of the situation. He never took a simple medical history from any of his students and he did not understand the student's expressed concerns about risk factors.

Third, while the Chinese are willing to practice patiently, accepting a lifetime commitment to their chi kung practice, the desire for a quick fix—which is a uniquely American phenomenon—is another factor in the hazards of chi kung practice.

Many Americans don't want to put the time in. They want instant results. Unfortunately, in their attempt to hasten their results, some students feel that if a little is good, a lot is better. These overly zealous students create serious health problems for themselves because they go beyond the suggested repetitions or the recommended duration of breath control. In a misguided effort to achieve faster benefits, they end up doing more harm than good.

It's also not unusual for some, in their haste for results, to practice chi kung at the wrong time.

"People are often not aware of the contraindications for chi kung practice," explains Elia. "There are times when you should not do any chi kung practice. For example, if you have the flu or are recovering from the flu, don't practice. If you have a fever, don't practice."

Why? According to Elia, when you're ill or recovering from an illness, chi is used for healing. When you are practicing chi kung, you are moving the chi through your body when it needs to concentrate in certain areas for healing.

There have also been several cases in which students have fainted during a chi kung class because their instructor never asked about their current health status.

"Drugs, including prescription drugs and alcohol, are also contraindicators for chi kung," Elia notes. "You should not drink cold fluids right before or right after

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chi kung practice.”

Elia also believes that practicing chi kung during the first trimester of pregnancy may cause a miscarriage. Many instructors are unaware of this and never caution their female students. Elia points out, however, that it is not chi kung itself that is dangerous. Instead, it is the ignorance about how it should be practiced.

You should also refrain from eating a large or heavy meal before you practice chi kung. After you eat such a meal, your blood and chi are focused in your stomach to aid digestion. Chi kung practice would disrupt that process. You should also avoid chi kung practice when you are famished because you may faint, he says.

During chi kung practice, the chi energy channels, called meridians, are opened, and the chi flows freely through them. For this reason, Elia also cautions against sitting down immediately after chi

To Chi or Not to Chi

Chi kung, which deals both with the healing and martial arts, is the art of cultivating *chi*. The concept of chi is so essential to health that it is the foundation for all of the Asian healing arts. Whether in traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture, herbology or massage, chi is the essential foundation upon which all treatment rests.

While chi is usually associated with the Chinese internal arts (e.g. *tai chi*), it is—or should be—of equal importance to all martial artists. External systems that emphasize the development of muscle strength often place great physical stress on the body. At first, the body will get stronger. After decades of such training, however, there can be serious medical problems. The body actually deteriorates from the rigors of the physical stress, sometimes causing cardiac problems and orthopedic problems such as arthritis. Chi kung can prevent these conditions because it emphasizes preserving the body.

“Whether they teach it or not, all of the Chinese masters of external systems also practice some internal system,” explains Randy Elia. “They do this to balance the harsh effects of their external training. They know that external training without some internal complement, like chi kung, would be like *yang* without *yin*.”

Regardless of what style you practice, chi kung should be a part of your regular practice. It will benefit your health as well as your martial arts.

kung practice.

“If you sit, you will compress the meridians and block the flow of energy,” he says. “It is better to walk around for a few minutes, allowing the chi to circulate freely. Otherwise, you may feel light-headed, or you might even faint.”

Proper Breathing

When you practice chi kung, it is also important to breathe properly, he says. If you don’t, you can damage your internal organs, he says.

“Breathing should be incorporated and coordinated with your movements,” he asserts.

It’s also imperative that you don’t hold your breath. Holding your breath can elevate your blood pressure, causing dizziness, fainting or heart strain. While Elia acknowledges that some advanced or esoteric chi kung practices do involve prolonged holding of the breath, he strongly cautions beginners to avoid such practice.

Other students, in their quest to develop internal power, engage in a variety of dangerous practices, including assuming inverted positions (like the yoga head- or shoulderstand) while holding their breath. Any medical doctor will verify that these students are courting a stroke. Anyone who does this, especially someone who is 40 or older, is endangering his life.

Iron Palm

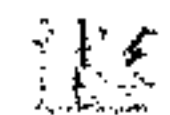
In addition to those problems, you also have to be careful while practicing iron palm, because the practice is clouded with faulty, dangerous misinformation.

“Improper iron palm practice can cause sterility,” asserts Elia. “You can damage an important acupuncture point in your palm and cause sterility. You need a qualified instructor. It’s as simple as that; otherwise, you are asking for problems.”

Traditionally, iron palm students begin by dropping their hands onto bags of mung beans, says Elia. When pulverized, the mung beans give off a medicinal dust. You should not breathe this dust, but it is beneficial when absorbed through the skin.

Iron palm users also fill the bags with pebbles of unglazed gravel. Eventually, they advance to iron balls. Elia, however, believes you should avoid zinc-coated bee bees because the zinc can be absorbed through your skin and can cause some problems.

Healthy Not Hazardous

Chi kung practice, like martial arts practice, can be extremely beneficial. But you must practice correctly and with a qualified instructor. Let chi kung be a healthy—not a hazardous—practice. 

About the author: Thomas J. Nardi, Ph.D., is a columnist for M.A. Training and studies massage, chi kung and tai chi at the Bergen Healing Arts Institute under Randy Elia.