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### THE FORCE... Now Appearing in a Galaxy Near You!

by Rick Barrett

Every one of us who left that theatre in the fall of 1977 knew that our lives had been changed forever. There was an electricity in the air that I had never encountered from a mere movie. We had suddenly and inexorably entered a new world of possibilities in a "galaxy far, far away," and the repercussions are still felt today.

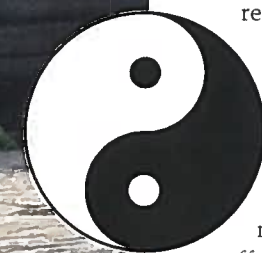
of so many of us was about this almost magical power that pervaded all of existence and could be wielded by adepts for good or evil. Those "strong with The Force" could create effects at a distance and sense events non-locally. They could cloud weaker minds and perform superhuman feats of agility. How much of that was really possible?

of the swamps of Dagobah with a wave of the hand (and don't expect to anytime soon), but The Force that I have encountered in the Chinese internal martial art of taijiquan has not disappointed.

The biggest "what if" implanted into the minds

I still haven't seen anyone lift a star cruiser out

Taijiquan, a.k.a. "t'ai chi," is mostly recognized as a gentle, mysterious exercise performed by millions for its health benefits. Regular practice enhances strength, flexibility, balance, oxygen saturation in the blood, and mental capacity and concentration. It can reduce loss of bone density, lower blood pressure, promote faster recovery from illness and injury, and boost the immune system. It is a "moving meditation," its slow, relaxed movements known to reduce stress and anxiety and enhance mental clarity. Fewer people are aware of taijiquan as an effective martial art, a so-called "soft" art that does not derive its power and effectiveness from muscular contraction. And this is where "The Force" comes in. Rather than doing knuckle push ups and breaking concrete blocks with your fists, taiji has you relax your muscles and focus on the cultivation of internal energy, called qi (pronounced "chee").



Energy is generated in the body by mentally holding poles in opposition,







a punch is stopped with a finger. Or when my petite daughter plays taiji “push hands” in tango shoes with a much larger partner.

Harder to measure, yet much more important to those of us on the far side of fifty, is the effect this “Force” has on your vitality. Many of us are living for more years, but

the famous yin and yang of traditional Chinese philosophy. This interplay of opposites provides the experiential foundation for a feast of paradoxical adages fit for a whole box of fortune cookies: “Softness overcomes hardness.” “Find the stillness in motion. Find the motion in stillness.” “Four ounces deflects a thousand pounds.”

The paradoxes greet your eyes as well. It is sometimes said (half-jokingly), “If it don’t look fake, it ain’t real taiji.” It’s good to keep this in mind when you see a diminutive grandma pushing around a man twice her size. Or when

that enhanced lifespan? How vibrant and alive do we feel? How well do we move? How comfortable and secure are we in our own bodies?

The vitality you come to embody through regular practice does not benefit you alone. You share it with others. I had a poignant encounter recently with my ninety year old father. Two weeks before he died, his doctor said that he was failing fast. When I reached him, he was unresponsive, dehydrated, hadn’t eaten in days, and was wasting away. I

held his feet gently in my hands and “plugged in,” sharing my qi with him. Soon his body began to move, small twitches at first, then larger movements. A couple of hours later, he was sitting up, eating ice cream. Two days later he was feeding himself, conversing freely, and ambulant enough to attend a concert my brothers and I performed at his assisted care facility. He passed peacefully in his sleep two weeks later.

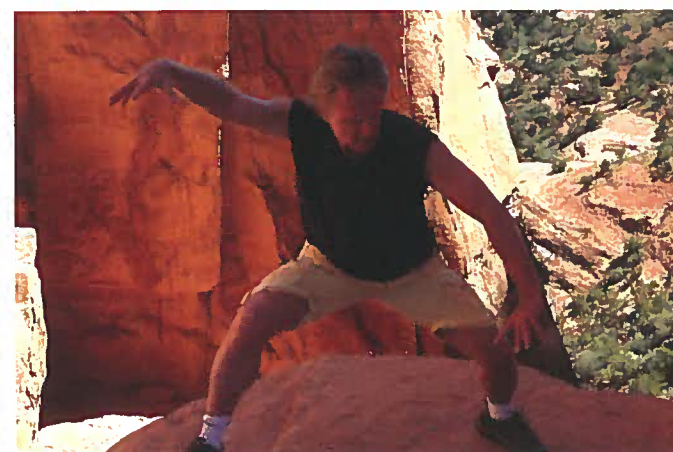


Taijiquan is legendary for its positive effect on health and longevity, but even more so for the grace, ease, and fluidity seen in its elderly practitioners. It promises, “The strength of a

practitioner. It promises, “The strength of a

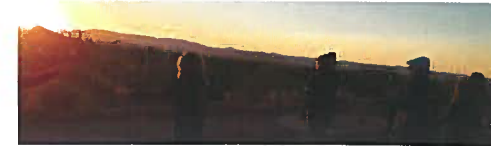






if a wealth of ancient wisdom were packed into a series of movements that allows you to experience these truths, not just think about them.

When is the best time to start? Now would be best, I think. Its effects are cumulative and transformational, so why delay? There are lots of different styles and approaches, and you want to find a class and teacher that resonates with you. So check out a couple. The best martial artist is not always the best teacher, but if you find one with good skills, depth of knowledge, and the eagerness to share that



knowledge...that's gold.  
And may The Force be with you.

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lumberjack, the pliability of a child, and the wisdom of a sage." Only those who actually put in the time and effort reap the full benefits. The doing is the healing.

From a Western scientific perspective, it may be useful to think of taiji's effect on the body as improved coherence resulting from body-mind integration. The mental emphasis of modern life creates an imbalance for many of us. We stop feeling our bodies except as a source of pain. Simply put, coherence is internal harmony resulting in a state of wholeness. Like teamwork, "The whole is greater than the sum of the parts." When your body is highly coherent, every move is effortless. Entropy, on the other hand, refers to the disorder in a system. That system is heading toward breaking down. Thus, entropy in any system is inversely proportional to coherence.

What this means in body-mind terms is that when body and mind are integrated and functioning at a high order of efficiency, cool stuff happens. When there is more coherence there is less entropy, everything works smoother, your mind is clearer and calmer, and the aging process slows down. You look younger, feel younger, think younger.

I was motivated to start almost forty years ago by chronic back and neck pain. That disappeared in short order, but by then I became fascinated with the dazzling possibilities of this remarkable art. Its physical benefits were undeniable, but hints of an "internal energy" that enhanced ability prompted me to look deeper.

Taijiquan is not a practice to be undertaken lightly. It only works if you do it regularly. But a little practice goes a long way. Fifteen to twenty minutes of relaxed, fluid movement in your living room can produce a huge change in your life. It is as

