

# MY BODY MIND SPIRIT

## Chi Nei Tsang master Gilles Marin palpates my internal organs to promote greater enjoyment of life

By Amy Moon

*Originally printed in the San Francisco Chronicle  
March 2007*



**According to Marin, emotions come from the body -- specifically, the guts -- and not from the mind, and the way to heal is to focus directly on this area.**

Sometimes you just know you're going to like someone -- I think of a woman I met at a cocktail party once who told me she saw the sleeve of her boyfriend's sport coat as he came through the door at a friend's house and knew he was the one.

It was like that for me with Gilles Marin, founder and director of the Chi Nei Tsang Institute in Berkeley, California. Actually, not quite. My knowing was a little less ephemeral. I'd read an excerpt from his book "Healing from Within with Chi Nei Tsang" which said:

*"For health and happiness everything in life is to be enjoyed. To keep enjoying it, take everything in moderation, including moderation!" Dr. Chang, one of my most influential teachers, used to say that it is healthier to get very drunk once a month than to drink a glass of wine or beer every day,*

*since our body does not have time in twenty-four hours to detoxify completely from alcohol. Drinking only once a month, even if we get drunk, will allow the body enough time to detoxify completely."*

I immediately thought, "Oh, I like this guy."

Just for the record, it's not as if I'm such a big drinker, but so many of these Mind Body Spirit practices tend toward discipline, a certain level of purification and, yes, the dreaded perfectionism. And my tendency slides much more toward the opposite end of the spectrum. Although, admittedly, I'm not so happy about that. Nonetheless, while I feel this pressure to go toward the light, another part of me really appreciates the reasonable voice, the one that winks and says: "Go ahead, have fun. Quit being so serious."

So I was looking forward to meeting Marin and experiencing Chi Nei Tsang, which I described in my last editorial meeting as "internal tai chi or chi kung," and after receiving bemused blank stares, I'd added, "It's centered in Berkeley." At which everyone laughed. To which I then felt like adding, "Hey wait, it's not like that."

**"Touch is important because emotions come from the physical," he says. "It's not mental. The mental part is just interpretation."**

It was a warm late afternoon when I parked outside the Chi Nei Tsang Institute on Telegraph Avenue, away from the hustle and bustle of the Berkeley campus. I was deciding whether to feed my meter when I noticed a man step out of the building. He wasn't looking around for me. He wasn't waiting. He just came out, took in the late afternoon sunlight and *was*. I knew it was him. He looked like (and I mean this in the best possible way) a cross between the head elf at Keebler and Gerard Depardieu (It's the French accent. I had already spoken to him on the phone) and the actor who played Tevya in the movie version of "Fiddler on the Roof." Earthy. Robust. Jolly, even. Like a baker. Or a tiller of the soil. Maybe I was

romanticizing a bit. Or maybe just relieved that he looked so solid and unethereal.

Within minutes of ushering me into the office, which felt really cozy and, yes, healing -- as much as an office can -- we had already exchanged at least a few rounds of pleasantries and giggles before settling into a treatment room. His laughter was full bodied, like a cross between a chuckle and a deep belly laugh. And I was laughing, too. That, in and of itself, felt healing.

Being totally relaxed is a good place to be because basically what Chi Nei Tsang practitioners do is massage your internal organs. This is how Marin describes it: *"My hands are in your guts, and your feelings are sandwiched between my hands and your breath."*

It's a Taoist healing modality that doesn't really lend itself to a purely technical or physiological explanation, because, as he explained, there is no separation between mind, body and spirit. They are the same. *"People get pain because it's easier to take pain at a physical level than an emotional one."*

### **"My hands are in your guts, and your feelings are sandwiched between my hands and your breath."**

The way I understand it is the practitioner palpates your abdomen or, more specifically, the fascia, which is the connective tissue between organs, muscles, tendons -- everything in there. It is a truly holistic healing approach which applies the Taoist concept of Five Elements -- Fire, Water, Earth, Wood and Metal -- as they relate to our internal organs and the way *chi* flows through them, to address our whole being. By moving the *chi* or "life force energy," negative energies and blockages are released -- freeing you up to physical, emotional and spiritual health.

Chi Nei Tsang has been successfully used to reduce or eliminate chronic pain and to treat conditions such as headaches, menstrual cramps, sciatica, fibroids, infertility, impotence and prostate problems as well as depression.

Before I got on the table, Marin asked me what I was there for. My litany was rambling and nonspecific and included: carpal tunnel symptoms; pain in right rotator cuff, neck, upper back and left knee; occasional insomnia; anxiety; erratic eating habits. "The list goes on," I said. He nodded and then gestured toward the table.

### **"People get pain because it's easier to take pain at a physical level than an emotional one."**

According to Marin, emotions come from the body -- specifically, the guts -- and not from the mind, and the way to heal is to focus directly on this area.

*"Touch is important because emotions come from the physical," he says. "It's not mental. The mental part is just interpretation."*

A great sensitivity is required in touching someone in this way. "People are so protective of their abdomen because that's where your life is coming from," he says. "But your body is well-protected, so there's no need to be afraid."

I lie face up, and as he begins massaging my abdomen, he tells me *the point of a session is to go towards healing, which means change."*

*"Everyone wants to heal, no one wants to change,"* he says, laughing.

His touch is sure and solid, and amazingly I'm not aware of any pressure at all. He talks to me continuously in a soothing voice while he works.

### **"True healing means you have to go through confusion and get rid of all maps."**

"Your belief system brought you to who you are now, so I like a slow progression towards change," he says. "It's easy for change to be spectacular, but I like to grow into it slowly. Like a tree."

I ask him, "What are we healing, or what is the goal?" He looks at me and says: "We are born to enjoy life. That is the point of human existence."

I counter by saying, "But I think in Buddhism they say the point of life is to know yourself." He laughs again. "Oh, that's too much for the mind. It's too hard. No, we are here to enjoy life."

I like that. I like it a lot. (And he is French, after all.) In any case, I'm happy to have my stomach massaged in service of that philosophy.

### **The point of a session is to "go towards healing, which means change."**

The Taoist system of health and well-being includes Chi Nei Tsang as well as tai chi, chi kung, kung fu and feng shui. In Marin's latest book, "Five Elements, Six Conditions," he describes the Taoist cosmology, the Elemental Forces of Existence, Universal Laws of Life and The Seven Informational Levels of the Heavenly Cycle. It's not exactly light reading but it is actually quite interesting and potentially useful (as well as complicated and esoteric), but I wasn't exactly sure how it related to how he massaged my belly.

Ultimately, what I've come to is this: By knowing this cosmology, the practitioner understands how the universe is ordered, and because your body is a microcosm of that macrocosm, he understands the proper order in your body and the forces at play there. This provides a framework from which to proceed in the work of healing and what Marin calls alchemy or transformation.

Marin makes a distinction between himself and allopathic practitioners, who identify a pathology and focus on a cure. *"I'm not here to fix you. I'm here to help you grow."*

"The next step could be anywhere," he says. "That's why I always ask where the boundaries are, because I don't want to push too hard. So I ask clients, 'Why are you here?'" He uses the limits of the person's understanding as a stepping-stone to the next step.

"Sometimes you just fall asleep. That's good." He laughs. "It gets the mind out of the way." *"No intelligence is required for healing," he says. "Healing is pure grace. What you need is honesty."*

### **"I'm not here to fix you. I'm here to help you grow."**

According to Marin, you won't find Chi Nei Tsang in China anymore. It used to be a monastic practice, but when Taoism disappeared -- when the White Cloud monks fled during the revolution -- the practice disappeared with them.

Marin learned Chi Nei Tsang from the master Mantak Chia, director of the International Healing Tao in Thailand, when Chia was in the United States during the early '80s. Chia was tutored by the last remaining White Cloud monk, and was told to spread the practices in the West. He garnered a certain amount of notoriety in the United States because people tended to focus on the Taoist sexual techniques he was teaching.

Marin tells me he used to spend time with Chia in the Catskills, New York. When I ask how they met, he answers, "Chance."

If it was chance, it was synchronistic because Marin was already on the path to becoming a healer. He had been studying traditional Chinese medicine with Dr Stephen T Chang, who wrote the first book on acupuncture in English. And before that, he studied aikido in the South of France with aikido master Andre Noquet.

In the early '80s, Marin was on his way to Japan to study traditional healing because he didn't want to go into the army, and stopped in San Francisco. He ended up staying.

"I got lucky," he grins. "I didn't have to learn Japanese. English was hard enough."

He adds, laughing again, "I'm still learning English."

**"No intelligence is required for healing," he says. "Healing is pure grace. What you need is honesty."**

Marin has been practicing and teaching Chi Nei Tsang in the San Francisco Bay Area for over 20 years now. These days, he spends a fair amount of time traveling and teaching around the world.

I wonder aloud why there aren't more Chi Nei Tsang practitioners. Marin says: "It's not easy. It takes a lot of discipline. It's not trying to fix anything. A true holistic approach is something not many people do. You have to understand health, life, forces of nature."

I ask him if he feels like he was called to it. "People are called because they like it. I like it. I don't mind spending the energy," he says. "It took a lot of training and work on myself. If I improve, my work improves. I do chi kung every day. I learn more by practicing year after year. My touching changes. I study everything available on Chinese traditional herbs."

He says Chi Nei Tsang is "applying meditation on a physical level."

He admits that "Meditation is all you need. But the problem is you're on your own. You need support. You need relationship."

But over time, through meditation, he says you can develop friendliness with yourself to do what a good friend does, which is to validate your feelings.

**"People are not educated to consider medicine beyond fixing."**

*"It's not about fixing," he says. "It's about validating."*

"So if I can do it myself, why come see you?"

He laughs and pushes his palms upward: "You get a boost."

Then he continues: "Your body is brought to a place where there's a new possibility. My job is to take you to the next step. As you grow, you lose the symptoms that tell you to grow."

So why isn't it more popular?

"Because it goes against the grain," he says. "Everyone wants to just take a pill, and then you don't change. It's not easy to change." He adds, "People are not educated to consider medicine beyond fixing."

Dennis Lewis, author of two critically acclaimed books on breath, "Tao of Natural Breathing" and "Free Your Breath, Free Your Mind," describes on his website ([www.authentic-breathing.com](http://www.authentic-breathing.com)) how he was healed by Marin. This transformation eventually led Lewis to study and practice Chi Nei Tsang himself, which led to his current involvement with breathwork.

"Chi Nei Tsang is complex and requires a lot of experience to know what you're doing," he told me over the phone. "If I were to continue, I would've had to learn a lot more. It requires persistence, study, intuition -- and I was more taken with wanting to move into breathing, even though Chi Nei Tsang really helped the people I've done it on."

He said: "Gilles is one of the most gifted practitioners in the world. He is one of the most gifted hands-on people who has worked on me, and I've had a lot of people work on me. His ability to understand with his hands probably exceeds other peoples'. It's his intuitive energy sense, which is very hard to teach. It isn't just manipulation of organs."

As for me, the massage generally just feels good. In fact, I am not aware of anything specific that he's doing, and afterward I can't recall anything, either. Maybe because there is no pain or friction whatsoever. The only slight pain comes from a spot near my navel, which Marin tells me is related to sleep.

## **Chi Nei Tsang is "applying meditation on a physical level."**

Afterward, he tells me to touch my stomach and see how it feels. It's soft. Spongy, fluffy all the way through soft. What happened to my abs? Kind of crazy, yet somehow I feel like it's a good thing, that maybe there was some major holding going on there.

Then he looks at me and gives me some homework: "You need sun." He says three times a day, maybe more, I should face the sun with my eyes closed and look through my eyelids at it for two or three minutes. When I open my eyes, it will be like I have sunglasses on because my pupils will have dilated. That is a parasympathetic response, which is calming. "And," he says, "the serotonin will be good for you."

This, of course, goes against everything I've been reading in women's magazines about staying out of the sun. "But what about sunscreen?" He shakes his head. "You don't need it." "But what about the ozone layer? The sun's rays are stronger now." He exclaims, "Even better!"

I'm skeptical but I agree to try. And for the next several days, I leave my desk and go down to the street and lean against walls and close my eyes and face the sun. I'm aware that doing this on a busy street in downtown San Francisco makes me feel vulnerable, as if there were potential danger all around.

The next time I talk to him, I say I've been doing it but haven't noticed anything. "Do more," he says. So I do. Or rather, I am. It feels good. And makes me realize how infrequently I just stand there and do nothing. Three minutes feels like a long time.

I need to trust earth energy, he says. I need to feel the earth is there supporting me.

*"True healing means you have to go through confusion and get rid of all maps." He says: "Healing requires transformation. Then one day you feel good. You don't understand why, but you feel good."*

"This goes against the psychoanalytical model, which is coming from a depressed perspective which says that emotions are the product of thought -- that mind comes first. That you think, then you feel." Instead, he says, the opposite is true.

**"Everyone wants to heal, no one wants to change," he says, laughing.**

"Too much thinking doesn't work, because then you're in problem-solving mode and anything you think about turns into a problem so you can solve it," he says. "We are thinking all the time." He laughs and shrugs. "There's no solution. It just makes it worse."

As my session ends, I notice that twilight has fallen in the room. I share a cup of tea with him, and he says: "There is no limit to self-growth. Healing is not about getting rid of a disease, it's to allow the body to live, enjoy life and grow as a person. "

"How do you know you're healed?" he asks me with a smile. "You feel good. You look back and say, 'Oh yeah, I used to feel that way.'"

As for me, I feel like my initial hunch was right. I knew I would like him. And that he would have something to offer me.

**Healing is not about getting rid of a disease, it's to allow the body to live, enjoy life and grow as a person. "**

*Gilles visits New Zealand once a year to give public talks, workshops and professional training. For details see [www.chineitsang.co.nz](http://www.chineitsang.co.nz) or contact Kim Knight (09) 833 6553 / 021 410 633.*

*The Chi Nei Tsang Institute is located at 2812 Telegraph Ave., Berkeley, CA 94705, (510) 848-9558. Or visit the Web site at [www.chineitsang.com](http://www.chineitsang.com). On the site is a list of practitioners. Or Google "Chi Nei Tsang" for more.*