

Shrink Rap Radio #41, July 8th, 2006. Bodymind Healing with Qigong

Dr. David Van Nuys, aka "Dr. Dave" interviews Dr. Michael Mayer

(Transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Barclay LeBrasseur)

Excerpt: *“The thesis of my book, really, is that every Tai Chi movement has four different levels of healing purpose; one is self-defence, one is self-healing, another is spiritual enfoldment, and the fourth is that it really is a way to change your psychological state – your stance in life. And so what I’m trying to do is to bring together those four different levels of healing purpose, so that the diasporas that has gone on, I believe, in Tai Chi and Qigong has changed so that we see that those four levels of meaning are there in all movements.”*

Introduction: That was the voice of my friend Dr. Michael Mayer, who is a licensed psychologist, hypnotherapist, and a Qigong/Tai Chi teacher in the San Francisco Bay area. Michael specializes in giving his patients self-healing methods for physical and mental health problems. He says he may have been the first person in the U.S. to train doctoral level psychology students in the integration of Qigong and Psychotherapy. He has also authored ten publications on bodymind healing, including books, audio tapes, and journal articles. He also founded one of the first complementary medicine clinics in this country. I recently had a chance to attend a day-long seminar that Michael taught on his integrative bodymind approach. I’m also in the process of reading his most recent book, which is both scholarly and extremely practical. The title is *Secrets to Living Longer: The Self-Healing Path of Qigong, Standing Meditation, and Tai Chi*. And now, here’s the interview.

Dr. Dave: My guest today is energy psychologist, Dr. Michael Mayer. Michael, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Mayer: Thanks, it’s great to be here.

Dr. Dave: Okay. Well Michael, you’re a licensed psychologist, and a Qigong and Tai Chi teacher, and you’ve integrated these two approaches into a unique synthesis, which you refer to as “bodymind healing.” So why don’t we start with a bit of your history. How did you get in to psychology in the first place and then how did that bring you into Qigong and Tai Chi?

Mayer: Well, initially I was going to be an attorney, because my father was an attorney,

and then when I was individuating, I decided to follow another path, and my father was very disappointed.

Dr. Dave: I'll bet.

Mayer: And I told my father, "Well, I'll still be an attorney, but I'm going to just be an attorney for the body, mind, and spirit."

Dr. Dave: Ah ha.

Mayer: And then I went on a quest to the West, and came out to the same school where you taught for a long time. Then, it was called the Humanistic Psychology Institute, and I started doing my doctoral program, and I was studying psychology and studying all those really interesting relaxation methods. For the amount of problems that I had in my body at that point, those relaxation methods didn't do quite enough for me, and then one day I saw somebody practicing a very strange-looking, but very relaxing-looking thing, and I found out that that was Tai Chi, and I went on a quest through the Bay area with quite a few teachers and then settled in on the teacher Fong Ha, that I've been working with for the last 30 years. And then, I studied with quite a few other people in medical Qigong, and other things. But that was my start back in the early '70's.

Dr. Dave: Okay. I've been enjoying your book – and I'll give people a reference to the book offline, and also there will be a link in the show notes – and I recall reading in the book that you were pretty stressed out about having to write your dissertation, and it was about at that point that you discovered Tai Chi.

Mayer: That's right.

Dr. Dave: And so this turned out to be – this settled you down enough that you were able to proceed then?

Mayer: Exactly. It would help me take the blocks that went on in my body, and helped to move them through, and helped to not only relax me, but it helped to – there's a whole philosophy behind it – and it did all of that and more for me.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, great. You know, the term Tai Chi I think is much more widely recognized by most people than Qigong. And I was surprised to read in your book that the term Qigong is in fact relatively new. Maybe you can give us a brief overview of the history of Tai Chi and of Qigong, and their relationship to one another.

Mayer: Well, there's a lot of scholars that have done a very good job with that and I have quite a bit about that in the introduction to my book, but before Qigong was a known term, the term was called "Tao-yin." And Tao-yin meant "leading and guiding the life force of the Universe." The term Qigong was first mentioned by a Taoist master's son, who died in about 374 A.D. but the term wasn't used in a specialized sense as the Qi cultivation we now know it to mean, until about the 20th century. And according to Taoist scholar Catherine Despau, the term Qigong appears in titles of Qi works in 1915 and 1929, where she talks about it in terms of working as therapy for tuberculosis in about 1936. And nowadays Qigong is used widely to talk about all of the medical uses of Qigong as well as self-healing exercise and meditation disciplines from ancient times to the present.

Tai Chi – Doug Wile and various authors like that, talk about the origins of Tai Chi, which also came a little bit late on the stage, but these were all really rooted, in terms of my understanding, back in shamanic practices. So in a certain sense, Qigong didn't just begin at the times that I said, and Tai Chi didn't begin just at the times I said, because this idea of working with the energy, (the life force of the Universe,) had to do with shamanic cultures all across the planet. And in the book I talk about how it was there in the Buddhist training, which was in the B.C. era, and it was in the Greek mystery tradition, it was there in Hinduism, it was there in the Jewish tradition. It was there in many, many traditions, this idea of working with the life force of the Universe.

Dr. Dave: Fascinating. Well some of that was new to me. As I was reading in your book, I didn't realize that it had permeated so many traditions. So, from your explanation I gather that Qigong has actually been around for a long time, although under a different name, and that the term "Qigong" is relatively new. Now, you refer to "Qi," you refer to "Life Energy," but give us just a little definition of Qi if you would.

Mayer: Well that would also get very complex, because I have a scientific as well as a mystical side to myself. Qi is normally defined as the "life force of the Universe," and so there are many debates that happened in some of the top journals, like the Journal of Subtle Energies, from an organization named ISSSEEM, in Colorado, that goes into really a lot of extensive dimensions of how much it is electromagnetic, how much it's broader than that, the various different manifestations of Qi. You could look at it in terms of the chakras; some people look at it that way. Other people look at it in terms of the energy that goes through the meridians. Some people look at it as the direct current that's there in the brain –

Dr. Dave: When you said “meridians” you’re referring to acupuncture meridians?

Mayer: Yes.

Dr. Dave: Okay. I just want that to be clear for listeners.

Mayer: That’s right. So, there are many different ways to talk about this Life Force and talk about the academics of what it really is, but in a sense it’s mysterious life energy, and at the deepest level we all are composed of this energy, and in the new era of energy medicine, what we now know is that that energy is responsible for healing. Since the work of Robert Becker and other people like that, we know that there’s a current of energy, and if that current is disturbed, that we don’t feel as well, and that’s why there is a shift in the era of biochemical medicine to an energy medicine that includes both.

Dr. Dave: Wonderful. And I understand that through the practice of Qigong and Tai Chi, one can begin to experience and actually feel this Qi, (Life Energy,) in their body.

Mayer: That’s right, virtually everybody that does a Tai Chi or Qigong class for a pretty short period of time will have that experience.

Dr. Dave: Okay, now in your book you use the term “bodymind,” and you use it extensively throughout the book. Tell us a little bit about the history of that term and what you intend when you use it.

Mayer: Well, the term first came into the Western literature from Ken Dychtwald, whose book *Bodymind* was written back in 1977, and there are now over 124 books on Amazon.com with the word bodymind in it. My site, www.bodymindhealing.com is a portal site for the bodymind healing sites on the World Wide Web, and so people can go there and check out more about bodymind healing traditions. Many people will talk about mind/body medicine. That’s a more commonly used term. And because of my intellectual orientation and because of the culture’s intellectual orientation, and because how much I believe our culture needs to be more embodied, I feel, like Ken Dychtwald did, that it’s important to put the body part first.

Dr. Dave: Okay. And so really this is another word that points to what people talk about when they talk about a holistic approach.

Mayer: That’s right.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, and in your book – I would guess that most of our listeners are familiar with sitting meditation, with Zen meditation and the process of sitting on a Zen meditation cushion. I notice in your book though, that you place a lot of emphasis on standing meditation. Perhaps you can describe standing meditation for us and tell us why that's so important.

Mayer: Well, Ken Cohen, one of the foremost Taoist scholars, describes standing meditation as the million-dollar secret of Qigong. And if you ask any Tai Chi or Qigong master they will tell you that; that it's the greatest secret of Qigong, which is basically doing nothing and finding contentment in being alight. And so it's really a form of meditation, just like others where you would do what you would do while you're sitting, you watch your breath. But in a standing posture, I and many other people find that – well let's say, when you're sitting you're crossing your legs, so some of your tension initially is focusing on the blocks that come up in your legs as they're crossed.

Dr. Dave: As they start to hurt.

Mayer: Exactly. And actually, one of the foremost Qigong teachers, Bodhidharma, was looking at sitting meditators back in old Indian China and decided that he wanted to be merciful and find a way to help these very enlightened but sedentary souls to help to heal their bodies and prevent their muscles from atrophying, and so one of the systems was developed by Bodhidharma out of his enlightened compassion to help monks that were sitting. And I like to make the analogy that today we have our sedentary office workers that are sitting and their bodies are also atrophying. So, Qigong as a form of standing meditation is a form of meditation that is not only for spirituality, but it also opens you up to a healing energy. And it's these specific ways having to do with cultivating the Qi while you are standing, doing various different imagery practices, different kinds of slight rocking's and circling. And so it's not an either/or thing. I have taught people that do sitting meditation how to do standing, and then they bring that awareness back into their sitting. So in effect, the standing meditation becomes an entryway into a way of Qi cultivation that can be done lying down, sitting, or standing.

Dr. Dave: Okay. And I know that both Tai Chi and Qigong have martial arts applications as well. Not only are they valuable for self-healing, and for spiritual development, but people who practice them for a long time develop martial arts techniques and powers. A mutual friend of ours, Sandy Rosenberg, gave me a book, the title of which escapes me, but I think "warrior" was in the title, and it spoke quite a bit about standing meditation, and told a story, and you probably know who this person is, somebody in China who was able to defeat a large number of contenders, barely moving

at all because he had developed his Qi so powerfully just by standing.

Mayer: Yes, the person you're referring to is Jan Diepersloot, who wrote the book called *Warriors of Stillness* –

Dr. Dave: That's it.

Mayer: – who's one of our Tai Chi brothers – and I and Jan studied together with this Grand Master from China in standing meditation – is one of the students of the person you're referring to, who's called Wang Xiangzhai. And Wang Xiangzhai was a sickly child, and his father sent him to study with various different Qigong and martial arts masters throughout China. And the story is exactly the way you say it, that he ended up healing himself and becoming one of the greatest martial artists of China, and when people would see how he would defeat these external martial artists so quickly, they would say, "How do you do this?" and he would say, "All I do is stand."

And so the thesis of my book, really, is that every Tai Chi movement has four different levels of healing purpose. One is self-defence, one is self-healing, another is spiritual enfoldment, and the fourth is that it really is a way to change your psychological state – your stance in life. And so what I'm trying to do is bring together those four different levels of healing purpose, so that the diaspora that has gone on, I believe, in Tai Chi and Qigong, is changed so that we see that those four levels of meaning are there in all movements.

Dr. Dave: Okay. In your book, you cite a considerable amount of evidence relating the healing of a wide variety of medical conditions. Now, how can this be? How does that work?

Mayer: Well, I have two different parts of my approach. One I call "bodymind healing Qigong," and the other I call "bodymind healing psychotherapy." So in each of those areas, healing happens – not for everybody, and it's always important to keep a circumspect scientific attitude towards all of those things, of course some methods work better for some than others. But there's a variety of literature that shows, for example with Qigong, for preventing falls amongst the elderly – there was a study from the Journal of the American Medical Association that showed that Tai Chi was better than any other of nine exercising systems from the West. It was better than any of those for preventing falls amongst the elderly.

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Mayer: Then, I could list many other diseases such as chronic pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, fibromyalgia, even shingles. There's a study down at the University of California, Los Angeles, by a doctor, psychiatrist named Dr. Irwin, who basically showed that Tai Chi was better than other methods for reducing the pain of shingles. But I really stand, not for Tai Chi and Qigong, but for integrative medicine. So in the integrative medical clinic that I helped to co-found and worked at for three years, I believe not in saying one method is better than the other, but that in a new era of integrative medicine – and there's a wide variety of us in the culture that are really advocating for that, to hope to reduce the sole power that western doctors have but to not denigrate that either, and to bring them into a healing mandala as partners with various other traditions, each of which have their own merit.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. In your clinic that you just referred to, let's see, there's you, who is trained as a clinical psychologist, I believe you have an M.D., a chiropractor, an acupuncturist, a naturopath... am I right, am I leaving anybody out?

Mayer: We have body workers there also. Yes, all of those people that you mentioned.

Dr. Dave: Okay, and so that makes for a very integrated approach.

Mayer: Yes.

Dr. Dave: In your work with clients – I should mention, I probably will mention in the introduction before this interview, that I did take a workshop with you this past weekend, a very wonderful workshop, and you told a couple of case histories in there, so maybe you could relate one of those, from your own work clients, this integration of psychological and medical and energy work.

Mayer: Okay, well let's see, I guess I could tell the story of one woman who had a lower back problem and went to an orthopaedic surgeon, and she was about to get lower back surgery. When I started working with her, I had her breathe and go into her back, and a memory of a past sexual assault came up, and after that she was able to walk and actually run again, and she didn't need to go and get surgery. I'm very careful, always, when I tell that – even though it was a very, very moving experience, and I could go into many more of the details of it – but she was also working with a chiropractor and the acupuncturist in our clinic. So, I can't be positive that the changes that went on in her were just due to the work that I did with her, but the depth of tears that came up when she realized that this place she had been stabbed in the back after the sexual assault, the level

of emotion that released at that point and the implications for that in terms of her life and what shifted in her, I think it was certainly instrumental in the change. And I think that those kinds of things are really what's behind – many different kinds of things get treated by drugs, or by surgery, or other things like that. And from the wider perspective of our current healthcare crisis, many dollars could be saved with these kinds of first line interventions that would help people to look at psychological and energetic imbalances that they have before going into much more extensive surgeries or medication regimens that produce side effects, insomnia, and various things like that.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, now I recall, when you described this particular case in the workshop, that it involved an integration of visualization, and also certain bodily postures that you had her assume. And you mentioned that you don't always label those as Qigong, per se.

Mayer: Exactly.

Dr. Dave: Which I found that very interesting.

Mayer: One of my desires is to present esoteric things in very down-to-earth ways without even using the language of Qigong and Tai Chi. And so when I'm training therapists – I've trained psychologists and therapists at various different schools in the Bay area and other places around the country – and some people aren't going to want anything esoteric or Eastern. And so, I just have her lie down and follow her breath, for she had a hard time sitting up even. She just followed her breath down what's called the Microcosmic orbit. That's an orbit that's known in Chinese medicine, but you don't need to even use words like that, you can just say, "notice the river coming over the top of your head and down into your body, and feel where it gets in... And that's where she felt it hit into this block in her back and from that the memory came up of this past sexual assault, where she was stabbed in her back. So you're right, I don't need to use any words having to do with Qigong. It's just knowing those energetic pathways can allow things to arise from them; old memories, healing states, altered states of consciousness.

Dr. Dave: Yes, yes, I was struck in your presentation in the workshop how skilfully you interwove different threads from different theoretical perspectives in really embodying the spirit of Tai Chi in terms of going with the person's energy rather than doing things that would evoke resistance from them.

Mayer: Oh, thank you, you're very kind of to say that.

Dr. Dave: Now, what benefits have you experienced in your own life as a result of

having practiced these disciplines for 30 years now?

Mayer: So many of the imbalances that were there in my own body, I now have a practice. I also like to think of this and try to tell my patients that these aren't one-time cures. A lot of people have notions that way and get disappointed. This is really a method of practice. So for me, I live a fairly stressful life with all of my writing and all of my workshops and travelling and other things like that. And as the stress starts to come up, what I do is I take my Qi and work with my body states and my mental states through these practices, and they've been very beneficial for me that way.

Dr. Dave: Okay. As I was leafing through your book, I noticed you have something on bullies and you had a personal story about them, and that's a topic that resonates for me. And listeners, if they go back to one of my early shows, I actually shared a story of being bullied in college, an incident. And as a male of the species who has had to deal with bullying when I was coming up through the ranks, I'm especially interested in your story. There were two bully stories in your book. Maybe you could share one of them.

Mayer: Well, as a very small man in the culture it was very easy to be picked on by bullies in my childhood also. And so I would have a fear in my body around that, and carried that with me in certain relationships with men. And then as I grew older and started to get in to Tai Chi and Qigong, it started to help me to change my life's stance. So the postural wave that I embodied, kind of collapsing my shoulders to protect myself and to close off and constrict, I started to notice those things in my body through various of the inner somatic work that I was doing on myself. And then part of Tai Chi practice is "push hands," or "joining hands practice," and so that starts to give you more confidence. And as I –

Dr. Dave: And I should say, that's with two people. You're sort of playing with each other's energies, and you're kind of pushing on each other in a circular manner.

Mayer: It's a method of learning that the stronger that you try to push on somebody, the weaker you really are, because it's a really method of learning how gentleness can overcome strength. And I always try to tell my students, be careful of feeling that these powers are more than they are, because it's really a way of learning the way of being a gentle warrior, so that if you have to use it, that already means there may be something wrong with your practice. And so I only had two occasions in my whole life of practice where they were times when I needed to use that, and the Tai Chi and Qigong really helped me that way. One time was when I was in Hawaii, and there was a drunk or somebody that was on two or three drugs at the same time, and he took a swing at me and

I was able to move out of the way. And I still felt very afraid at that point, and yet it, I'm sure, saved me a broken nose or something, to be able to move out of the way, and he fell into a table.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Mayer: And the second time was at a local outdoors place where people are parking, and somebody cut in front of me at the parking lot and I, in a, I must admit, a not too non-attached way, started honking on my horn. And then I said, "Uh-oh, I must have made a mistake," when I saw this guy get out of the car, because I'm about 5'8 and this person was maybe 6'1, 6'2, and really solidly built, and I was just a little guy and a scholar. And this is after practicing for quite some time, and when the person started coming up to me, he came to grab my neck and shake me because he was so angry that I was honking the horn at him even though he had stolen my parking space. So, there's one particular practice that we have in our method of joining hands that has to do with – it's called a splitting movement, that comes from the ancient crane. And so I was able to just split his force as he was coming to grab my neck. This is an empty force type of method, where that person just feels like the energy is sucked out of their body and feels very exposed. And being a gentle spirit myself and not really interested in hurting anybody, I just stopped right at that point and he saw what I could do, and then he said, "I'm sorry man, I wasn't really meaning to do anything, you just shouldn't be –" and then he said, "Yeah I guess I shouldn't have been cutting you off," and he apologized. So that was a very empowering event for me, and a part of my own healing, in terms of developing more confidence in the way that I was in my body.

Dr. Dave: That's great. I just love those stories. I guess I'm still working through certain issues myself. To sort of leap back, there was a question I meant to ask you earlier –

Mayer: Can I just add one more point on that?

Dr. Dave: Sure.

Mayer: I work with a lot of women that have been sexually abused, and one of my most joyful experiences was with one woman who worked with me for a while who had a history of multiple rapes, and was very, very afraid of being around any kind of exposed situation with a man. Somebody at a laundromat came up and just put his hand on her hand and she very skilfully, from one the Tai Chi movements she had learned in our class, was able to deflect that. And so, she said that that was an important part of healing. And some of the new forms of trauma therapy, of healing from trauma and post-traumatic

stress, from some of the top people in the field, like Dr. Bethel Vandercock. What he does is, he talks about the importance of the somatic, not just an intellectual dimension, in reducing healing, in reducing stress, and the sympathetic nervous system overload that comes from people that are suffering from post-traumatic stress. And I was very happy when I heard that he was using my Bodymind Healing Qigong DVD in the training of trauma therapy. So this idea of integrating the psychological and introducing various different kinds of somatic practices such as Tai Chi are a very important part of healing people that are suffering in those ways.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, and one of the topics that listeners know that I'm very interested in is dreaming, and dreams, and in your book you relate in important dream that came to you at the very beginning of this whole journey. You had a – you went on a vision quest and you had an important dream. Can you recap that here for us?

Mayer: Well, it wasn't actually a dream, it was more actually like a vision, but still to this day I don't know exactly what it was. But, I was in the woods because I had a fear of sleeping out in the woods at night, and so, not just wanting to be psychological about it, I decided to go out into the woods for 40 nights, and one night when I was sleeping there, seven deer came up to me, and I was in a state, I think it would be called lucid dreaming, where I was half awake and half asleep. And these deer came up to me, and I said to myself, "Whoops, I better be careful. Maybe I'm in the deer's territory and so I'm going to pretend that I'm asleep." And a deer came and it kissed my eye while it was quivering, and at the next moment what I noticed was that it was sucked out of its socket. And I said, "Oh no," and I started going in to this place where I said my parents when I crawled back to civilization, I was going to say, "I told you so. Why couldn't you just have stayed inside the house like we had always told you." And that was almost worse than the idea that I was going to go around for the rest of my life without an eye. But when I let go to my fate and took a deep breath and said, "Well, I love being out in the woods, and if this is the price I have to pay, I guess I'm going to go around with a patch on my eye for the rest of my life." At that moment, when I let go, I noticed that I missed a healing ritual that was going on, where the deer was washing my eye in its mouth, and doing this healing. And then it put the eye back in my socket, and it was no longer an eye, but it was some kind of green stone, like a piece of emerald, or jade, or something like that. And when I woke up later, a little bit before sunrise when it was just beginning to get light, as soon as I woke up I said, "Wow, what an amazing dream that was! Huh, very interesting, that was one of the most powerful dreams I've ever had."

Dr. Dave: I guess.

Mayer: But then I looked around me and it wasn't a dream at all, because I noticed that there were deer prints all around me. So what actually happened, I'm not sure, but the way I like to tell the story is, that, amongst Native Americans when you have a dream like that, you look at it as a life passed. And when I went back to my doctoral group at that time and worked on the dream, I would have, if I was in an ancient culture, I would have taken on the name, "Deer Kissing Eyes." And that has taken on my path, and that has become my path, which is to try to kiss other people's eyes the way mine that was kissed, and take them through a transformative journey where they can see that their ways of being in life have a special gem-like character. If they really follow their dream patterns and all of our experiences in life, we have that ability to heal, to go through a healing journey, to find out our own issues, whether they're from our parents or whatever, to let go of them and to see the specialness of our own ways of being; to not forget that helping of others

Dr. Dave: Well that's a great place for us to wrap it up. And I have to say, I'm very impressed by your book. It reveals deep commitment and scholarship, and I think you do a good job of bridging East and West for the reader who may be new to this sort of thing. So I will refer people to your book and to your DVD, and to your website. And Michael, I want to thank you so much for being a guest on Shrink Rap Radio.

Mayer: Thanks so much. And I hope that some of your listeners will contact me if they have any more questions at drmicheal@bodymindhealing.com.

Dr. Dave: Okay, well thanks a lot.

Mayer: Thank you David.

[Music plays.]

Dr. Dave: Okay, I hope you enjoyed this interview with Dr. Michael Mayer. One of the things that particularly interested me is his view that Qigong and Tai Chi are rooted in shamanism. As it happens, I've just returned from a five-day training in the shamanic practice of an approach called "soul retrieval." This training was held in Park City, Utah, through the Four Winds Society. The Four Winds Society offers training and even certification in shamanic work, and it's the brainchild of Dr. Alberto Villoldo, who was my guest on Shrink Rap Radio #31. If you haven't heard that episode, and you would like to learn more about this approach to shamanism, you might want to go back and listen to

that episode.

I also was a student of Tai Chi for two or three years, so I have a bit of a feel for both approaches. The idea that these two traditions would have common roots rings true to my experience. Both in my own Tai Chi practice, and in the daylong experience I had with Michael Mayer, I noted there is considerable emphasis on the use of imagery and imagination. In order to develop Chi, the student is asked to engage in exercises involving visualization and imagination; for example, the Tai Chi/Qigong student is likely to be asked to imagine their feet growing roots which reach deep into the ground. Similarly, they may be asked to imagine energy flowing into the crown of their head from above. They may be instructed to imagine they're holding a beach ball in front of themselves and to experience it as a ball of energy. As one becomes more adept to these exercises of visualization and kinaesthetic imagination, they will begin to experience, and presumably accumulate, Chi. so, the practice is much more than simple postures and movements. The mind and imagination have to be fully engaged as well, if one is to progress. The whole system involves learning to accumulate and direct this Chi energy. In Dr. Mayer's book, he also brings in corollary information about the seven energy centers in the body known as the chakras. Both the chakra system and the physical moves of Qigong and Tai Chi originate in India. Interestingly, my five-day experience with shamanism also spent considerable time working with the chakras. The tradition I'm being trained in is derived primarily from the Incas, but reportedly early societies around the world have recognized these energy centers. And again, the imaginal world plays a major role in the shamanic work. A practice known as "shamanic journeying" is fundamental to the shaman's work. By entering the imaginal world, the shaman has the experience of leaving his or her body, encountering power animals, guides, and various other entities. Of course, the shaman's physical body doesn't go anywhere.

Now in the rationalist Western tradition, we would be inclined to say that the Tai Chi master and the shaman are just imagining these energies; just imagining. And when we say just imagining, we mean they are not real. In the West, imagination is not regarded as real. In these non-Western traditions however, imagination is seen as real and as a useful tool for shaping and moving energy. Western science however, continues to produce more and more evidence that the illusion is not what we imagined, but rather what we consider to be hard, fast, and real. The chair I'm sitting on is solid and real. But now we know that at a deeper level there is nothing solid about it. It is all space, energy, and motion. We're also learning that our thoughts and our emotions are intimately connected to our underlying biochemistry, and to our health. What we imagine may help to kill us or to heal us.

So I find it very interesting the degree to which Qigong, Tai Chi, and Shamanism intersect. As for myself, I'm an adept in neither. The chair still seems solid as a rock to me, and my concentration reels like the proverbial drunken monkey. But I'm working on it.