

# **The Tao is Ever Youthful**

**Mark Powell**

*“He who is in harmony with the Tao is like a newborn child.”*

—Tao Te Ching, verse 55

Young children have supple bodies and supple minds. Their thinking is open, fluid, fresh, original. Their limbs are flexible, yielding, pliant, yet surprisingly strong. As we age, our minds fill with fixed concepts and static beliefs; we become “set in our ways.” We become stiff and life starts to seem dry and old. Simultaneously, our bodies become calcified and brittle when compared to our childhood selves.

We presume all of this to be normal, but is it? Haven't we all met people, at some point in our lives, people who brazenly defied this “normal” rigidification? Haven't you at least once, crossed paths with an elderly person whose body was peculiarly supple and nimble and whose thinking was spontaneous, open, and inexhaustibly creative? I would suggest that such people—no matter how rare they are—are not genetic anomalies, but rather that they represent our most natural state, throughout our lives. Furthermore, I am convinced that, even if your body and mind have begun to stiffen and calcify, you can initiate a powerful process of youthing, a process that washes away time, that moves you in the direction of flexibility, suppleness and fluidity, of limb and thought.

If you wish to return your bodymind to its natural state, open and vibrant, you have before you the exciting process of experimenting with different approaches to see what works best for you. Your body and mind truly are one, singular process, that's why rigidity in one almost always co-exists with rigidity in the other. But most of the modalities that can support your youthing process tend to emphasize one dimension of the being, the mind or the body, more than the other.

For the mental dimension, even conventional psychological therapy can help us to see certain fixed mental constructs that we didn't even know we were peering through. A newer psychological system called Psychology of Mind (or the Health Realization model) is also very nice for helping people access that fresh, ever new state of the young child, which they call “free flow mode.” Certain meditation approaches can also empower our ability to “step back” and gain space from various rigid life attitudes and previously unconscious presumptions that keep us interacting with life in fixed, stereotypical patterns.

Indeed, some of the early Zen Masters spoke in terms of realizing one's Original Mind. Krishnamurti's writings are virtually all aimed at stripping away the old accumulations from the mind, to allow fresh, original perception and thought. The Divine Avatar, Adi Da, might describe all of our unnatural “oldness” as coming from the chronic life orientation of “avoiding relationship.” This is the usual way of being wherein we live contracted upon ourselves (the gesture of the closed fist), preoccupied with our own subjectivity, rather than turned out, in fully abandoned, free participation in life (the gesture of the open hand). To live as “the open hand,” is to be porous enough to be

always touched by life, which is always just as fresh, brilliant and mysterious as it was when you were just a toddler.

Of course, mentioning these resources is not to suggest that you can't enjoy some significant youthing merely by generating a mighty intention and resolve. You can deliberately cultivate a new, passionate curiosity and receptivity about people and things. You can develop new creative arts, engage new life challenges, take new risks. Get a degree in anthropology. Learn Swahili. Take up the bouzouki. No matter how you start to regain the freshness and openness of your mind, you'll likely notice changes in your body, too—more looseness, lightness, expressiveness.

If you're moved to come at this more from the body side, you'll be amazed to experience how working with the body affects your ways of thinking. Systems like Feldenkraise or Continuum or bioenergetic therapy are beautiful and elegant approaches to breaking up brittle ways of living in and as the body.

Yoga, theatrical training, certain dance forms (like contact improvisation) and certain martial arts (like Tai Chi, Hsing I, or Pa Kua) can also open up the body's possibilities for movement and expression. Depending on how they're taught, however, some of these disciplines can enforce an equally artificial, fixed "norm" of movement, as unfree and unnatural as the randomly accumulated ones you're trying to break out of! It depends on the teacher and your unique constitution. The barometer? It may be hard, but, overall, it should make you more alive, open, free and spontaneous in your body, not like you've acquired a new set of "shoulds" to conform to.

Another option is Rolfing®, my discipline. As a Rolfer®, I use my hands to directly soften and free up bodily rigidities, in a precise, systematic progression. I work, mindfully and reverently, with my client's myofascial tissues, releasing old restrictions, melting the hard, tough, "armoring" that has accumulated. This restores circulation, length, openness and bodily "spaciousness," allowing more of the pliant quality of a young child to come fourth. The Tao Te Ching asks, "Can you let your body become as supple as a newborn child's?" This "Taoist Rolfing," as I sometimes think of it, facilitates your own consciousness of how you "do" rigidity and constriction, in mind and body. Again, the Tao Te Ching: "The Master has no resistances in his body."

However you come at it, this "youthing" process is always the opposite of the consumer model. It is not one of accumulating and acquiring and "adding to." It is always one of releasing, relinquishing, letting go, unlearning, and stripping away. Because the natural condition of your bodymind is pristine, free, unencumbered, or, as the 6<sup>th</sup> Patriarch of Zen said, "pure from the beginning." You simply have to go through the journey of discovering all the crusty limitations that have accumulated over the years in your body and mind, and throwing them away. What you will discover, a little more with each passing month, is a whole bodily presence that is as free, spontaneous and fluid as a young child, but one who gets to decide his or her own bedtime. And it really doesn't get much better than that.