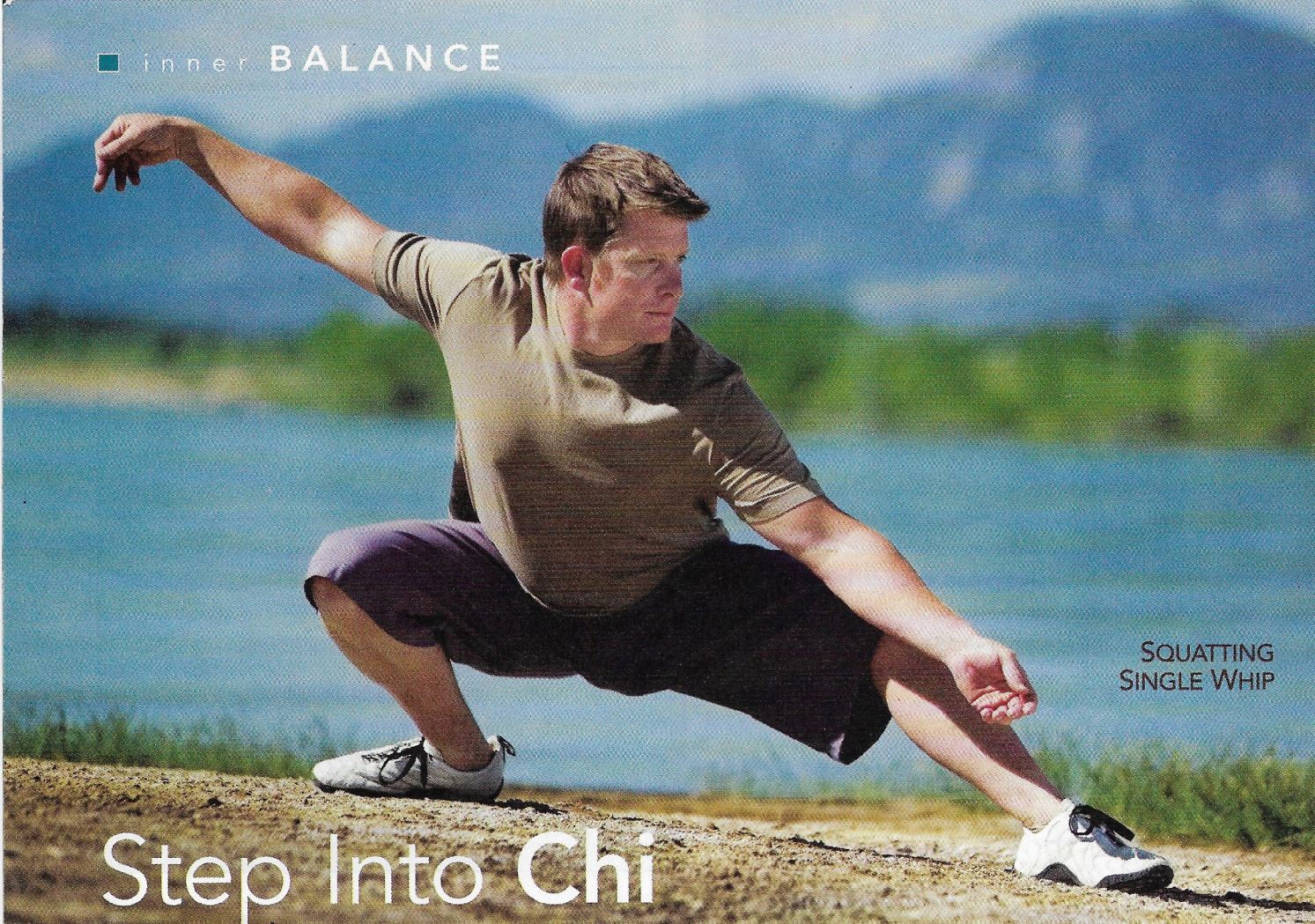




SQUATTING
SINGLE WHIP

Step Into Chi

Regain your footing with martial arts.

BY KERRI ALLEN

Euripides once said, “The best and safest thing is to keep a balance in your life.” Nearly 2,500 years later, we still strive for balance—in our diets, our budgets, our bodies. By looking to martial arts for kickbacks from ancient wisdom, many people find themselves regaining their footing, both physically and mentally.

Martial arts practices can be divided into two categories: external or “hard,” like karate and judo, which focus on strength and force, and the internal or “soft” arts, like t’ai chi and qigong, which emphasize mental coordination and relaxation. While people often perceive the external arts as violent or designed solely for self-defense, when practiced with mindfulness, they can produce the same spiritual benefits of the soft arts.

“When I looked in the mirror, I was crooked. I was a corkscrew,”

David Nijankin recalls. Before he started practicing karate, the 41-year-old father of two reluctantly lived with a physical imbalance caused by college sports injuries. After 20 years of chronic back pain, countless prescription drugs, and appointments with medical specialists, he felt defeated. But just a few weeks after enrolling in a shorinjiryu karatedo class that fo-

He practiced karate with John Mirrione Jr., an internationally acclaimed sensei who runs Harmony By Karate in New York City. His dojo is different than most in the US, Mirrione says, because of the spiritual philosophy behind every move. “It’s not about learning to beat someone up,” he says. “The discipline is in the silent meditation. You want to be in the best meditative state

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cused equally on spiritual balance and physical strength, Nijankin changed. “Now, my core is stronger, my stride is longer, I stand up taller,” he says. “It has been transformational.”

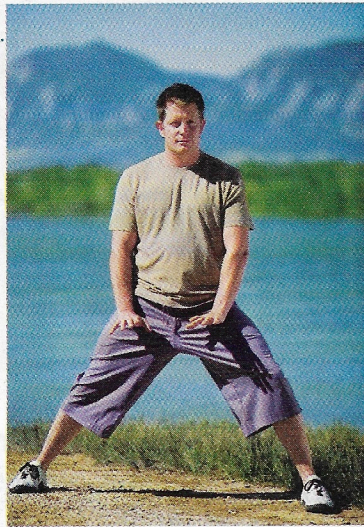
to rid yourself of fear. That’s the harmonious aspect of this art.”

According to the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, martial arts practitioners between the ages of 40 and 60 display

A T'AI CHI WARM-UP

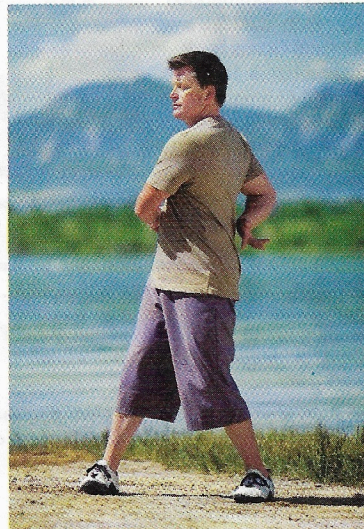
1. HORSE STANCE

Horse Stance, a classic t'ai chi grounding pose, improves posture and creates more circulation in your joints. In this pose, set your feet wide apart and sink your weight down into both feet as if you were settling down into the saddle of a horse. The tailbone drops, knees bend, the pelvis tilts slightly up, and the head draws upward toward the sky. Bend your elbows and press down through the air with your palms, creating a vibrant connection to the earth.



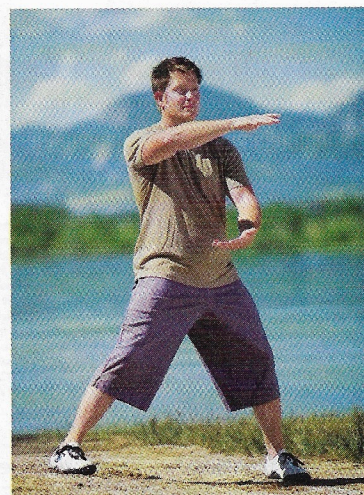
2. THE CHINESE DRUM

The Chinese Drum mimics the motion of those little toy drums with the two swinging beads. Stand with your feet a little wider than shoulder width, and keep your knees, as always, slightly bent. Gently turn, swinging your arms out. The lead (left) arm swings across the back to strike the flank, as the trailing (right) arm swings across the front of the body to strike the other side. With each turn and releasing breath, allow the body to let go even more. The slapping gently stimulates the internal organs and allows unconscious emotions to be released.



3. WAVE HANDS IN CLOUDS

Shifting your weight to the left foot, turn your right palm down and draw it toward your armpit. Turn your left hand up, and hold it at your navel directly under your right hand. Your hands simulate that they are holding a ball of chi—visualize it as a ball of energy moving between them, enlivening your body. Shift the weight to your right foot, and reverse, circling your hands so that your left hand moves to the high position, palm facing down. Imagine your hands moving like clouds, connecting you to an effortless flow.



greater balance and flexibility—and less body fat—than those who do not practice any form of martial arts. The study went on to say that “health professionals should be aware that there are alternative methods to traditional exercise that can increase the physical fitness and health of the middle-aged population.”

This isn't news to the six million Americans already practicing t'ai chi. This internal art originated in China and nearly 100 million Chinese practice it to promote health and longevity. Marked by slow movements and deep breathing, t'ai chi has been cited as a treatment for ailments as varied as rheumatoid arthritis, depression, and tension headaches. A recent study conducted by the Department of Sports Science and Physical Education at the Chinese University of Hong Kong showed that t'ai chi significantly helps improve physical balance. Known as “plantar pressure,” the distribution of weight in various parts of the foot in t'ai chi practice fosters balance control and muscle strength. Studies have shown that t'ai chi is particularly beneficial for older people who are often fearful of losing their balance or falling.

Qigong (pronounced “chee gung”) is another popular martial art from China, but has yet to gain mainstream recognition in the US. Literally meaning “breath work,” qigong teaches the practitioner to managing his or her own breathing to achieve and maintain good health. Hong Liu is a qigong master and author (with Paul Perry) of the book *The Healing Art of Qi Gong: Ancient Wisdom from a Modern Master* (Warner Books, 1997). “Changes in the breathing cycle show that energy is trying to balance. Some people will begin to breathe faster, some slower,” he writes. “Either way, it's a normal part of rebalancing.” And that sounds good in any era. **AM**

Kerri Allen is a member of the American Society of Journalists and Authors. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, among many other publications.