

# GUT INSTINCT

What can our internal abdominal organs tell us about our state of mind? Can we improve our overall health by strengthening our stomachs? Hsin-Yi Cohen investigates Chi Nei Tsang, a Taoist-based approach to healing through self-awareness



**WE'VE** all heard about “butterflies in the stomach”, “having a gut feeling” or being “sick with worry”. However, far from being just quaint figures of speech, these sayings actually arise from a real link between our gut and our emotions.

This is the premise behind Chi Nei Tsang, a holistic approach to healing, based on Taoist principles. Translated literally as: internal organs Chi transformation, Chi Nei Tsang was developed by Chinese monks as a means of detoxifying and strengthening their bodies. Today, it is a form of therapy that uses abdominal massage to release toxins and energy blocks, and can be so powerful that it has been known to address cancer and cure chronic illness.

On a practical level, treatment involves the use of Chi-Kung and deep, soft massage, to gently manipulate the internal abdominal organs. This stimulates the lymphatic and circulatory systems, and strengthens the immune system. It also encourages the visceral structures to work better and corrects postural problems, such as backache, that result from internal imbalances.

However, Chi Nei Tsang involves more than simple detoxification and therapeutic stimulation. Its real power lies in its ability to help us connect with our emotions and get to the cause of an illness. Its followers believe that physical symptoms such as pain are signs of a deeper disturbance and should be regarded as important messages; that unless the inner self and a cause are addressed, those symptoms will simply return with a vengeance. So, how does massaging your stomach help you heal your inner self?

Gilles Marin, founder and director of the Chi Nei Tsang Institute in Berkeley, California, recently visited New Zealand to give a series of talks and workshops on the principles of the practice. The fundamental tenet, he explained, is that we process emotions through our digestive tract in the same way that we digest food. Some emotions are easily digested, such as the pleasure of a smile, but others – fed by intense fear, anger, grief or shock – may be so traumatic that your body resists their digestion as a form of self-protection. These unresolved responses are stored in the gut, where they stagnate,

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leading to energy blocks and—ultimately – ill health.

If this all sounds a little fanciful, you might be surprised to learn that there is good scientific basis for such beliefs. It has long been known that the body has two nervous systems: The familiar one based in the head – the central nervous system – and an equally important one in the gut. This second network of neurons and neurotransmitters, located in the tissues lining the oesophagus, stomach, small intestine and colon, is known as the enteric nervous system. It displays the same complex circuitry that makes up the brain, functioning independently, learning, remembering and feeling.

Developmental biologists point out that the two systems develop from the same clump of tissue early in embryogenesis. And it has been observed that they also react the same way. For example, during sleep, the “gut brain” produces 90-minute cycles of slow-wave muscle contractions, punctuated by short bursts of rapid muscle movements. This mirrors the 90-minute cycles of slow-wave sleep, punctuated by periods of rapid eye movement,

stimulated by the “head brain”. Furthermore, patients with bowel problems have been shown to have abnormal REM sleep, lending credence to the old wives’ tale that indigestion can give you nightmares.

Like the followers of Chi Nei Tsang, many scientists now believe that the gut plays a major role in human emotions. In fact, increasing research supporting this theory is leading to a new field of medicine called neurogastroenterology. Many problems, including ulcers, chronic abdominal pain, and gastro-intestinal disorders such as irritable bowel syndrome, are now believed to be due to problems in the ‘gut brain’, which mirrors the emotional state of the brain up top.

This accounts for the way in which the stress hormones released when we encounter a frightening situation can stimulate a chemical surge or “butterflies” in the gut, or cause cramps and diarrhoea. It may also explain why millions of people taking antidepressants suffer from gastro-intestinal problems such as nausea and diarrhoea. And it all fits nicely with the Chi Nei Tsang belief that the abdomen stores unresolved emotions

that manifest themselves as physical problems and illnesses.

During a session, the Chi Nei Tsang practitioner guides your breathing as they massage specific areas of your abdomen and encourage you to connect with your repressed emotions. The true healing comes from within yourself, though, when you open your mind and accept your feelings. This, emphasises Marin, is the key:

“I believe that we are all responsible for our own health – the object of Chi Nei Tsang is to help people grow by listening to their bodies, not fixing them. Healing only comes from within. People need to have increased awareness of themselves and recognise that everything they feel is important. You don’t need to justify or explain feelings, only validate them. Only then can the emotional charge be freed and turned into healing energy.”

What’s more, this form of therapy is having significant success around the world. Listing practitioners from France to Hawaii, Japan to Mexico, the Chi Nei Tsang Institute website also presents impressive case studies. Take, for example, the 34-year-old woman diagnosed with malignant abdominal cancer, who chose Chi Nei Tsang massage over conventional chemotherapy and surgery. After only eight treatments, her specialist was shocked not to be able to find any sign of the tumour, and suggested that the original diagnosis must have been mistaken.

And a cathartic experience during her own treatment for chronic

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fatigue syndrome is what inspired Kim Knight to leave her corporate career and train as a practitioner. She now runs the New Zealand Chi Nei Tsang Clinic, and is the point of contact for events and workshops with Gilles Marin in Australasia. She feels keenly that as a holistic approach advocating health through self-awareness and healing from within, Chi Nei Tsang offers a worthwhile antidote to the stresses and challenges of the modern world. 

#### FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT OF A CHI NEI TSANG SESSION

Having been assured that I would never really understand Chi Nei Tsang unless I experienced a session first-hand, I duly made an appointment with Kim Knight. On arriving, I was shown to the treatment room, where Kim carefully went through questions concerning my personal details, background, medical history and most importantly, any emotional issues and goals that I might have. She emphasised, however, that it was important not to approach the session with any expectations, but rather just to keep my mind open and let my body fulfil its own needs.

Lying on the treatment table with my legs bent and supported by cushions, arms at my sides, I was instructed to close my eyes, free my mind from conscious thought and focus on my breathing. I was to make sure I tried to fill my abdomen to the full with each breath, then breathe out slowly through my mouth. Her hands began moving, gently at first, then more firmly, pressing, kneading and rolling across my stomach. Occasionally, she focused on the area around my navel, pressing deeply with her fingers. At other times, she pulled the skin and "jiggled" it gently back

#### TO FIND OUT MORE:

Chi Nei Tsang Clinic – New Zealand  
<http://www.chineitsang.co.nz>

Kim Knight – practitioner: (09) 8336553 / 021 410 633

\* Giles Marin will be returning to New Zealand in August 2007.

For details of other talks, workshops and practitioner training, please visit the website.

Chi Nei Tsang In Australia – for talks and workshops with other teachers, please see: [www.chimove.com](http://www.chimove.com)

and forth, as if shaking out the entire abdominal area. It was a strange sensation, particularly as the only other time I'd ever had my abdomen prodded was in the GP's surgery! And for someone with an eternally busy mind, the hardest thing for me was to stop thinking and just live in the moment.

Gradually, as the session wore on, I felt myself start to relax into a deep, almost unconscious state. Kim completed the treatment with a short, guided meditation, before leaving me for a few minutes to come slowly to myself. Although I didn't experience the cathartic emotional release many others appear to have had, Kim assured me this was not necessary for healing. She stressed that the body knows best how to use the chi released by the abdominal massage and would still be benefiting from the session. I don't know if I felt healed as I left the clinic – perhaps I did not have deep emotional or health issues to heal – but I certainly left feeling more deeply relaxed than I had done in a long time.

*Kim Knight – Chi Nei Tsang practitioner:  
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