

## *From the Kitchen*

28 April 2010



For almost a week, my life has had a different rhythm to it. I've been attending a Tai Ji retreat in New Zealand.

It has been a wonderful combination of learning new ways to move and to be in my body; periods of stillness, physical labour, walking and climbing, playing music, sharing poetry and clean food. The large, octagonal space in which we do most of our learning and practice, as well as the sanctuary where we spend part of each day, look out over mountains and inlets, ocean and mangrove swamps, forest, farmland and gardens. We hear and feel the wind, the birds, the insects and voices from the vege patch. It is all done without haste, yet there are set times of the day for the various activities.



We talk about bringing such un-haste into our lives when we return home. Discussion turns to strategies for not having the 'outside' dictate – is this to be achieved through resistance or through yielding? The pine trees on the hill opposite do both, when pushed by the wind. Can we do that back home? It is the result of firm rootedness combined with flexibility and strength. It is also about moving back and forth between yin and yang.

I rediscover how unconscious I am most of the time – random thoughts, random movement, random breaths. The focus of these three in the flowing discipline of Tai Ji brings them together, working as one. As a result there is a sense of having more energy, because less is required to move coherently. I find that the time before lunch spent at physical work on the property can be used to apply what we are learning in the classes: posture, stance, turning, lifting, moving backwards and forwards, wielding tools.

It reminds me of learning to touch-type years ago. I could type quite well, with random application of *some* of my fingers. To learn to type properly, I did the basic exercises and, when actually typing, kept myself to the excruciatingly slow pace that allowed me to use all the correct fingers. Gradually my speed increased until, after three months, I was as fast as I used to be. And my speed increased beyond that point *and* I could type without watching my fingers dancing on the keys.

To apply the Tai Ji principles outside the comfortable confines of the classes, I have had to slow myself down to a coordinated snail's pace, retraining my brain and my body, adjusting my relationship to the earth and its gravity. It initially sounded strange to be told that the lifting of a shoulder to move an arm (and the spade in my hands) starts with my heel but,

when applied, the spade with its load seemed to have lost much of its weight and the wheelbarrow filled with gravel willingly cooperated as we went up the hill.

The daily, afternoon walk up to the sanctuary became progressively easier and this was not simply a result of increasing fitness. The 2 km with a rise of over 100 metres seemed to become shorter and flatter each day as I used my body differently. I also found I could sit for thirty minutes on the stone floor, cross-legged, as I repeatedly blew a single note on a shakuhachi, listening to and feeling the reverberations in the empty space. This echoed the repeated practice of a lifting of a single shoulder or the turning of a foot, feeling what was required on a muscle-by-muscle basis. Breathing was common to both activities.

Shared evening music playing and singing was part of the swaying of the week, as was one evening of writing Haiku-like verses:

Hungry heron descends.  
Frog dives off the lily pad and farts.  
Wisdom in a bubble.

Stick insects everywhere.  
Hard to see.  
That's the point.



It is called a retreat because it is through stepping back from daily life that it is possible to see more clearly what we normally do. But I don't expect to have anything new slide into my life without attention and practice, awareness of habits and a willingness to take a step backwards in order to change those habits.

I'm sure I will need to receive more instruction in Tai Ji and I cannot imagine a more beautiful and nourishing setting than [Mana Retreat](#) on the Coromandel Peninsula. I'm also sure that any excuse to go back to the Coromandel will do (if I need an excuse).