



# The Greatest Gift

By Margot Rossi M.Ac.



Margot is an acupuncturist, Asian medicine physician, health educator, and movement instructor with 30 years of experience. Her book 'To Be Like Water - Cultivating a Graceful and Fulfilling Life Through the Virtues of Water and Dao Yin Therapeutic Movement' was born from her passion to help people develop an awareness of mind, body and spirit to cultivate a happy, healthful life.

Trained in the US and China, Margot creates innovative programs on mindfulness, self-care, preventive and complementary medicines, Dao Yin, and Hatha yoga. In addition to Western and Asian therapeutic movement practices, Margot has training in classical ballet, belly dance, and modern dance. She lives with her family by the pristine waters of the South Toe River in Western North Carolina.

While I was working on my book, I spent a lot of time visiting water. Up my road is a spring that feeds into the sometimes lazy, sometimes roaring South Toe River in the valley below. Just down the hill from our home, a happy-go-lucky stream meanders through a tangle of rhododendrons. Across the river is a boggy place where mist rises into hovering clouds. At the high elevation where we live, winter offers magical, strange frozen-water formations such as hoar frost and rime ice. All that is to say that I have plenty of opportunities to observe water, attending to how it emerges from the ground, falls from the sky, changes state, and flows amorously.



Our local spring

Why is water, in all its various forms, so significant to me? Water is at the very foundation of Chinese medicine theory, which is essentially applied Chinese philosophy. Daoists used water and its flow through a landscape as a metaphor for energy moving through our bodies; our bodies moving through our lives; and our thoughts moving through our minds. Water is also a metaphor for our attention — how it flows, pools and seeps into hidden spaces. Finally, we can 'be like water' as we choose our responses to ourselves, each other and our environment as we flow through our lives. We can fight what we experience or we can go with the flow.

Water moves with ease, without struggle, through all kinds of landscapes. These now rolling Blue Ridge Mountains were transformed from sharp rocky peaks by water's continued and persistent presence. The principal deep wisdom I've gleaned, over these past four years of intently observing water, is that we can change the landscape of our body and the shape of our lives when we allow our energy and attention to flow, seep into, and transform it like water. The relationship works both ways; change the landscape and the energy and attention can shift, too. This shifting of the body to change the flow of energy, and vice-versa, is the cornerstone of South and East Asian energy cultivation, movement, and therapeutic practices.

To experience how the shape of your landscape changes your energy, I invite you to lie down with your legs long yet softly bent at the knees, arms resting by your sides. If you prefer to be seated, go for it. Allow your attention, like water, to travel through the landscape of your body from head to toes. Notice the rolling hills and dales, the full round curves, the bony peaks. Take note of your weight, length, and width. Check in with how your body is contacting the earth, even if through a chair.

Tune in and notice any sensations in the landscape of your body — maybe you feel the firm pressure from the ground beneath you, a tingle or vibration in your palms, perhaps an ache or sharp sensation you might call ‘pain’ in a joint, or a feeling of ease or tension in a muscle. Does one side of your body feel different than the other? Moving your attention to your breath, where do you feel your breath moving most clearly in your body - chest, ribs, belly? What’s your breath like in that breathing space - slow, fast; deep, shallow; wide, narrow? Tuning in to your energy, how does the landscape impact upon it - do you feel energised, tired, strong, weak, tense, or relaxed? To really get a ‘picture’ of yourself, create your own metaphor to describe your landscape. What is the shape of your landscape like? Maybe it’s not a landscape at all. Maybe an image comes, maybe not. (Sitting here, I’m like a hollow walnut husk).

Like water moving through a landscape, the body scan we just did invites us to inhabit ourselves with attention, bit by bit, until we have a full sense of ourselves.

Now, widen your legs and extend an arm out in one direction and the other arm in another direction - it doesn’t matter if your arms and legs are symmetrical. Notice any sensations now. By changing your shape, did your sensations shift? Have new ones arisen, or former ones faded? Did your breathing space shift location or the qualities of your breath change? Do you feel strong, weak, energised, tired, or relaxed? What is the shape of you like now? (I now feel like the tree that walnut husk fell from). How did the changes in

your landscape change your experience?

When we integrate movement with attention, we begin to stretch our understanding of ourselves. To check this out, move around a bit, just now, and pay attention. Are there places you can’t move so easily? If so, is that due to limitations - pain or discomfort? Are there movements you feel really comfortable making, so much so that you don’t even have to make an effort? If you hold your breath, or focus your eyes in a certain way, does that change your mobility? Reflecting in this way, we get direct feedback on the effects our actions have on us. We can also see where we are, and are not, fully ‘living’ in the landscape of our bodies and lives.

One of the things I appreciate about mindful movement practices like Qigong, Tai Ji Quan, Dao Yin, Yoga, or some of the Western energy-sensitive practices like Alexander Technique, is that they invite us consciously and slowly to explore and transform the shape

of our landscape, just like water does as it flows down a mountain. Moving mindfully, we can observe the effect of the movements and postures on our energy. In this way, we have the possibility of positively affecting our physiology and mental-emotional wellbeing, as well as shifting how we relate to the world around us with intention - consciously.

In Asian medicine, we understand that pain is caused by not enough or too much energy engulfing a particular organ, tissue, or energy pathway. To understand this concept of energy in relation to pain, we imagine a stream. If water gets obstructed by a dam of tangled sticks, there will be a deficiency of water downstream and an excess above. Sometimes there’s no dam, just not enough water in the stream causing the stream to pool and stagnate in places. Either way, there is no longer a continuous flow.

Where energy is not flowing, the landscape doesn’t receive



Water shaping stone



nourishment or a way of refreshing itself. This is when we can experience physical or emotional pain. Likewise, anywhere lacking the energy of our attention for a long enough time is likely to experience dysfunction or pain, whether physical, mental, emotional, or all three.

From this, we can understand how regulating the volume and flow of our energy and attention is the basic treatment principle of Asian medicine, regardless of whether you are receiving Acupuncture, Herbal medicine, Dao Yin exercises or Shiatsu as treatment. Resting attention, breathing and movement together - in the form of mindful movement - is one of the most potent medicines I offer my patients. Recently, I've been exploring another way we can attend to ourselves and I'm discovering it is quite powerful.

In the last year, I've been working with a Shiatsu practitioner, rediscovering how to tune in more and more to the power of touch. It's made quite an impact on me, so I'm turning my attention to working with various kinds of touch in my practice, as well as in my movement classes. While



Rime ice on pine needles

most movement classes don't involve touching ourselves with our hands, I find this is one of the most rewarding invitations as we move - it can bring up vulnerability, tenderness, and it can build awareness.

Cultivating a sense of presence inside yourself is its own medicine. It's often said, you can change only what you're aware of, what you are truly present to. If you are looking to change your experience - whether that's the pain in your fingers when you try to open a jar of pickles, acid

reflux after eating summer-ripe tomatoes, or anxiety you can't seem to shake off - a skilful and essential first step to healing is to cultivate an awareness of yourself and how you respond to whatever (or whoever) arises in your body, mind or environment.

This way of healing requires a small commitment: to cultivate your attention, consciously invite it, direct it, or notice where your attention lands without direction, and be aware of what you discover. Just as a stream changes day to day, so can your attention.

I see this attention as the greatest gift we can give ourselves.

As one of my favorite musical artists, Heloise Letissier, writes, 'Ce qui se caresse est cicatrisé', which can be translated as 'What is caressed is healed.' Being like water means letting your attention go where it's called and inviting it into places where it hasn't been for a long time. Be curious and let this water of attention touch you deeply, all over. See how your landscape and your energy - your life - transform from its presence and touch.



Margot practising Dao Yin at the South Toe River

