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Illustration by Stefano Vitale

Chi Whiz!

By Karen Westerberg Reyes, May & June 2006

If you're tired of those aches and pains and longing to get back to being physical again...walk this way

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Call me skeptical. I've been on this earth long enough to know there are few, if any, true panaceas, palliatives, or perfect cures. And it is with that attitude that I (and my very arthritic knee) approached an all-day ChiWalking seminar last summer. (*Chi*, pronounced *chee*, means the energy force that animates all things.) My friend Janelle had taken the class several months earlier, and when she heard that Danny Dreyer, who formulated the technique and authored the book [ChiWalking](#), was leading the class, she told me this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity I couldn't miss. "You'll learn to walk again. The right way," she explained, "effortlessly, like a child." Learning the technique had been "life-changing," she said: it made her regular running/walking exercises easier. "The aches and pains I had just taken for granted since I started working out this way five years ago virtually disappeared." It didn't happen overnight, she added. "You have to work at it, but when the aha moment comes, when all the things you've learned start coming together, you'll be a convert."

When I met Danny, the first thing I noticed was his quietness of soul. Being in his presence was akin to the feeling I experienced when I visited a Buddhist temple in Kyoto, Japan, and sneaked in through the back entrance to watch a cluster of monks deep in prayer. Danny had the same serenity and sureness of being about him. It made me take notice of his words, all spoken in soft reverential tones. He had the demeanor of a holy man who had patiently spent a lifetime studying how to attain that elusive blending of mind, spirit, and body. And, indeed, that's exactly what he had done. His ChiRunning and ChiWalking techniques were the result of 35 years of his own experience exploring the physiology of movement combined with what he calls his "investigation of the invisible"—first with a meditation master from India, next with Zhu Xilin, a Chinese tai chi master, and later with another tai chi master, George Xu, who told him that "one could take the principles of tai chi and use them in any sport."

The sport that Danny was interested in was running. Eventually he perfected his technique of channeling chi, relaxation, and meditation into his running to the point that he became a world-class ultramarathoner, running distances of 30 to 100 miles at a time.

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Then he applied that same technique to walking—although, he's quick to point out, running and walking long distances isn't what this is about. "It's about teaching people to move in the ways we were designed to move—naturally, smoothly, and without strain."

The members of the ChiWalking class came together at a park in Wheaton, Maryland, on a crystal-clear summer morning. It was an interesting group of around a dozen people. Most of them were over 50. Several had read Danny's earlier book, *ChiRunning*, and were already disciples of his method. Then there was me—a complete neophyte who didn't know chi from chai—and, of course, that arthritic knee. I decided to give myself an out in case the regimen got too intense. I told Danny that I might have to opt out of a couple of the exercises because of my knee, which had severely curtailed walking—my major form of exercise—over the past couple of years. "You do whatever feels comfortable," he said. "But I think you'll be surprised at what you can do." As it turned out, I was.

ChiWalking is based on five steps: aligning the body and mind; engaging core muscles and willpower; creating balance between the upper and lower, and right and left, sides of the body; making the choice to stick with your healthy program; and moving forward toward your goal. "Master these and you master your own universe," Danny instructed. Well, he got my attention.

We spent almost the whole morning just learning how to stand straight, a critical requirement we had to master even before we could take one step. This wasn't as easy as it sounds. In tai chi all movement comes from the spine. If you're truly standing straight, Danny explained, "chi flows more easily, just as water flows through a straight pipe much easier than through a bent one." It took a lot of trial and error before each of us was in the position (or some semblance thereof): straight spine, relaxed shoulders, leveled pelvis, and relaxed knees, hips, and ankles. I felt as if I was being instructed on how to ski or ice-skate. It was a totally different way of relating to the ground. "It gets easier with time," Danny said. I hoped so.

I have to tell you, I was a bit unsure of whether I was going to be able to walk while remembering all this stuff. Then Danny added another step: now that we had gone through the basics, he wanted us to "listen" to our bodies. As we moved forward, he said, we were to really concentrate on what felt right and what needed adjustment. Once I started moving, I could feel lots of tension in my ankles. "Relax ankles," my mind told my body. Check. Then I noticed my shoulders were very tight (that's where I carry most of my stress). "Relax shoulders." My shoulders ignored me. I really had to concentrate. Just when I'd get one recalcitrant part of my body to listen to me, another would act up.

Then, after about an hour of trying out different walking speeds, listening to my body, adjusting, paying attention to form, and listening again, something wonderful happened. I almost got it. No, I didn't master it. I'm still working on that, and will be for a long time. But I got enough of it to get a preview. I was walking at a good pace, and it was...smooth and balanced. I was actually gliding. I don't know how else to describe the experience. It almost felt as if something was propelling me from behind, helping me to move forward. When I told Danny about this at our break, he smiled. "That's your own inner energy. Your chi. You've tapped into it. And there's lots more where that came from." Wow. Maybe this guy was onto something.

After the break we walked some more. Uphill, downhill, onto dirt paths, around the trees. All the while Danny kept coaching us. After about an hour of this I suddenly realized just how much ground we had covered. And how long I'd actually been walking. Longer than I had been able to in a very long time because of my painful knee. Did it still hurt? Of course it did. This method wasn't going to create a miracle. But I have to say that the pain in my knee became secondary to my joy at just being able to move again. And then Danny one-upped even that.

At this point it was late afternoon. We had been working at perfecting our technique for about six hours, minus a couple of breaks and lunch. I don't know if I was more surprised that I was still on my feet or that I still felt energetic. That's when Danny informed us that there are many different types of walks. There are walks that help you relax, that energize you, and there are even walks to help you focus your mind. Each has a different formula.

energy. Direct your mind to accomplish healthful goals.

2. Engage your core Stand straight, and level your pelvis to engage your core muscles.

3. Create balance Check the symmetry of your stance. Create a walking plan that works just for you.

4. Make a choice Envision a personal goal and commit to achieving it.

5. Move forward Unite your mind and body as you begin your healthier way of life.

Now, to close out the day, he was going to treat us to a chi-gathering walk. Its purpose: to calm the spirit, to luxuriate all the senses, to let the mind truly relax. He talked us through the phases: walk slowly, don't think about any one thing, just let your eyes wander where they want. Notice your world in three dimensions—that faraway tree, the close-up light pole, the middle-distance bush. "The world isn't a flat canvas," he coached. "Feast on everything around you; open your entire being to the energy that surrounds you." After about 15 minutes of this, I was suddenly transformed. Instead of being in the park, I started to feel as if I was part of the park. I couldn't wait to try all this new stuff at home. But that turned out to be more of a challenge than I realized.

The next day when I went out to exercise my ChiWalking skills, I bombed. I thought I knew enough to start right off walking. I didn't take the time to go through the preliminaries: to align my body, set my mind. The walking seemed more labored than what I had experienced the day before in class. And my knee hurt enough to take my attention away from everything else I was trying to do. I went back to the house, copied down a cheat sheet of things to remember, and tried again. Anybody watching me that day would have wondered why this woman was talking to herself, stopping and reading from a sheet of paper in her hand, and then walking again. ChiWalking really was like learning to ski or ice-skate. It wasn't something you could perfect in a day.

Flash-forward to the present. I've been ChiWalking at least three times a week, sometimes four. I still can't walk as far as I used to before my knee complicated the issue. But the important thing is I'm walking. And that's making my life so much better. It took me about a month before I could walk without my cheat sheet, although I still consult it to make sure I'm doing everything right. Every time I go out now it becomes easier and more enjoyable. And there are times—not every time, mind you, but more and more now—when everything comes together. I get into the rhythm of the movement, into my connection with ground and gravity and my space in the nature that surrounds me. I hear myself say "aha," and I'm gliding.

[ChiWalking: The Five Mindful Steps for Lifelong Health and Energy](#) by Danny Dreyer and Katherine Dreyer (Fireside/Simon & Schuster, 2006) is available in bookstores, by calling 866-327-7867, or by logging on to www.chiwalking.com.

Karen Westerberg Reyes is AARP The Magazine's editorial projects manager.

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