To our daughter,

_The Journey is the reward._

– Chinese proverb
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CHAPTER ONE

Health Is the Goal, Movement Is the Key

Above all, do not lose your desire to walk. Every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness. I have walked myself into my best thoughts, and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it.—Søren Kierkegaard

The crowds roared with enthusiasm as Edward Payson Weston crossed the finish line. People lined the streets to watch him and cheer him on. Weston was a leading sports figure of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an athlete who captured the hearts and attention of Americans and Europeans by walking long distances. During Weston’s time, walking was a glamorous sport, and stadiums regularly filled with spectators for walking events and matches.
Weston was also a wonderful study for the doctors of the time. At age 67 he was examined by thirty doctors who found that his muscles, lungs, breathing capacity, eyes, and mental alertness were the same as when he was 32 years of age. In his sixties and seventies he beat many of the records he had set in his youth.

Weston had unknowingly tapped into the Upward Spiral of Chi, which is the promise of ChiWalking. In ChiWalking your health and energy can increase as you grow more proficient in your walking and make mindful choices in your life.

Today, many of us have lost sight of walking’s potential as a healthy activity and sport. We’ve been blinded by the glamour of machines, gizmos, and new fitness crazes, forgetting what is right inside us all the time and what is available to us by just getting out the door and taking a walk outside. ChiWalking unlocks the hidden potential in walking by exploring all its vast possibilities. With ChiWalking, you’ll get into great physical shape, strengthen your life force, increase your energy, and be inspired for a lifetime.

If I don’t limit my enthusiasm for walking, I would say in walking we really have found the Fountain of Youth. Now, that may sound like a ridiculous exaggeration, but I mean it. There are numerous studies that I will cite that show the tremendous health benefits of walking. It truly is a miraculous tonic for your health and well-being.

**East Meets West: Maximizing the Benefits of Walking**

Walking is the most popular physical activity in the world. In the United States alone, almost 80 million people call themselves walkers; half of these consider themselves “fitness” walkers. It has been shown time and time again that walkers have less incidence of cancer, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and other killer diseases. Walkers live longer and have a greater optimism about life than those who are sedentary.

Here’s a statement that really impressed me in my research on walking: “Research shows that adults who are physically active in
their 50s and early 60s are about 35 percent less likely to die in the next eight years than those who are sedentary. For those who have a high heart risk because of diabetes, high blood pressure, or smoking, the reduction is 45 percent.” (November 2004 issue of the journal *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise.* A study done by researchers at the University of Michigan Medical School and the VA Ann Arbor Health Care System.) The positive effect walking can have in your life is really amazing! It can literally mean the difference between life and death.

There are, however, very few places to learn how to walk correctly. Most people seem to think that walking is like breathing, that we all just naturally walk correctly. Well, first of all, most adults don’t breathe correctly (but you’ll learn about correct breathing in chapter 5). Second, most people walk in a way that keeps them stuck in poor movement habits that restrict their flow of energy and can even degrade their fitness level.

Also, unlike with breathing, children put a lot of energy and concentration on learning to walk—and they do it really well. Think what joy we all feel at watching a child take her first steps. You’d think she had found the cure for cancer. Well, guess what? She just might have! (There are studies that show that walking reduces the incidence of certain types of cancer.) Yes, toddlers may fall and stumble and look a little like Frankenstein’s monster at first, but the makings of perfect walking form are right there. That is, until they start imitating older kids who walk around with “attitude.” Kids start changing their posture and walking habits as early as age 4 or 5, when they begin to emulate the movements of us adults who, unfortunately, have picked up some pretty poor habits. We slouch in our chairs, hunch over our desks, cross our legs, stand with our knees locked and our hips thrust forward. Any one of these will cause bones and joints to move in ways that they weren’t designed to move.

There are many reasons why we don’t naturally walk the way we are supposed to. Through stress and strain, our bodies have become misaligned, imbalanced, and stiff. One place we all tend to hold tension without realizing it is in our pelvic area and hips, the area of our
body most involved during walking. Stiffness in our hips translates to the misalignment of the spine and overuse of our legs, which cause injury and fatigue. Most people are walking in a way that often causes back pain, knee pain, foot problems, shin splints, sciatica, and a host of other common ailments. Most men that I observe on the street are walking purely on leg power, holding their pelvis motionless. This overworks their hips and keeps their spine disengaged from their walking. As they age, their hips need to be replaced from overuse and their spine begins to atrophy or disintegrate from the lack of movement. Many of the women I see walking have too little core strength and too much lateral movement in their pelvis. This leads to similar lower-back and hip problems during their later years. Both of these scenarios can be avoided if the right movement habits are established earlier in life.

Take, for example, one of the main premises of ChiWalking, that you lead with your upper body. Watch all people under the age of 4 and you’ll see them leading with their upper bodies when they walk. Watch almost all people over the age of 14 and you’ll see them leading with their hips and pulling themselves forward with their legs. Believe it or not, our legs are not designed to pull us forward. They are there to move our bodies forward in the world, but they are intended to be powered by our strong center, our engaged core. Your core muscles are those deep muscles that work to stabilize your pelvis during movement. We’ve all gotten the notion that legs do the walking. No, no, no—our whole bodies walk. The power that drives our movement should come from what in Pilates is called the powerhouse and what we call in T’ai Chi your dantien.

Remember the nursery rhyme “The Farmer in the Dell,” about the farmer who takes a wife, who takes a child, who takes a maid? That nursery rhyme explains how things work best on the farm, right down to the mouse taking the cheese. Well, in our current way of walking, we’ve reversed the way things are meant to be, as if the cheese has taken the rat, who has taken the cat, who has taken the dog, et cetera, ending with the wife taking the farmer who knows where?
In ChiWalking, that nursery rhyme might look something like this:

*The mind creates the alignment.*  
*The alignment allows the lean.*  
*The lean moves the spine.*  
*The spine moves the pelvis.*  
*The pelvis moves the legs.*  
*And heigh-ho the derry-o, the body moves forward.*

But, instead of the above, here is how many of us are currently walking: our overworked legs push and pull the body forward, our center collapses in weakness, our hips stay locked and inflexible, and our neck and lower back ache because they are twisted out of alignment—ouch! What a crazy way to move through life! Now, I am being a bit harsh, but there is a lot of truth in what I am saying. These bad habits can be commonly found in today’s walkers. Most people currently walk at about 50 percent efficiency or less. Poor structural alignment and the lack of core muscle strength create a body that is out of balance, inefficient, and often in pain or discomfort.

Many of my clients are interested in completing a walking event because that goal is challenging for them. But walking 5 to 10 miles or a half or full marathon can be daunting. They quickly see that the way they walk causes discomfort, pain, and even injury as they increase the duration of their walks. They are reaching the physical limits of their current walking habits, habits that can hinder their progress and cramp their style.

With ChiWalking, the first step of the Five-Step Process is to get aligned, which means to correct your posture. This alone can counteract many of the problems listed above. You will learn walking habits that increase the flow of energy, open up tight joints, and allow much greater freedom of movement, a freedom that allows you to dream big and reach your goals, whether they are to lose weight, walk a marathon, or just feel great.
The "Chi" in ChiWalking

To create the kind of walking that truly benefits your whole body, you need to start with your mind. Another name for ChiWalking might be “intelligent walking” because in ChiWalking your mind educates your body while your body in turn informs your mind.

ChiWalking is about mastering the sport of walking by turning it into a daily practice from which you will learn efficient movement skills as well as how to direct and transform your energy. Mindful movement along with the free flow of energy through your body will keep you healthy and vibrant for a lifetime and turn your walking into a complete mind-body fitness program.

ChiWalking takes its cues from T’ai Chi, which is based on the study of Nature and the movement of animals. T’ai Chi is an ancient Chinese martial art that has been passed on from one T’ai Chi master to the next over thousands of years. My own teacher, Master George Xu, is world renowned and has learned from the masters of this great lineage. Inherent in T’ai Chi is a deep understanding of the human body and its incredible potential and ability to adapt, change, and learn. At its most elemental, T’ai Chi is the study of energy, chi, or life force. T’ai Chi teaches us that we can cultivate and direct the chi in our bodies by moving our bodies in certain ways, some of them quite simple and yet powerful. By aligning your spine, engaging your core muscles, and relaxing everything else, you tap into an infinite source of chi. It can be as simple as sitting up straight when you find yourself dozing off during a long symphony performance. All of a sudden the fatigue you were experiencing only moments before has vanished, leaving you energized and awake—just in time for the drive home.

In order for chi to flow through your body, you must first open the pathways for it to move freely. Any misalignment in your structure or tightness in your joints and muscles will restrict this flow of energy the same way a crimp in a garden hose restricts water flow. This is where the Five Steps come in. You’ll be aligning your posture, engaging your core, and creating balance in your body, which allows chi to flow from the top of your head to your feet. You’ll then direct this energy by making a choice and moving forward with this energy.
Additionally, when you are aligned in your body, you also become aligned with the forces of Nature. Gravity becomes your ally, and your body becomes a conduit for the chi in Nature to move through you. When you set up the right conditions for chi to flow—it will.

**Intelligent Walking: The New Normal**

I enjoy all that walking affords, especially the freedom to explore new places. I also love to challenge myself with more difficult terrain, walking longer distances, and, my personal favorite, seeing how long I can walk without a lapse of focus on following my breath. I did it once for 45 minutes, and it was one of the most memorable walks I’ve ever had.

Marathon walking has become the goal of millions of people and the new frontier of physical fitness. In a recent poll, more than 70 percent of the walkers surveyed stated a desire to train for and participate in a marathon or other distance-walking event. Almost 38 million Americans identify themselves as fitness walkers. I think the most fascinating frontier for each of us can be the exploration of our own internal self, how we move and what we can do to move more efficiently. We are just scratching the surface of the booming body-mind-spirit connection that everyone talks about. When we learn something deeply and fully through our bodies, it is a gateway to mental and emotional and, yes, even spiritual understandings that can help us evolve and grow as human beings. Those who use yoga or T’ai Chi as a practice understand this. In their quest for human understanding and evolution through movement of the body, yoga’s rich, ancient, and spiritual beginnings are similar to those of T’ai Chi.

In ChiWalking we are bringing the knowledge of these ancient traditions into your walking. But don’t let that put you off if all this body-mind-spirit stuff does not interest you. If you just want a good fitness program, that’s here too, in spades. You can count on it. And that’s where we’ll focus, on the physical fitness foundation, while giving you information about how these physical practices can have a powerful and wonderful influence on your mental and emotional states.
This Five-Step Process grounds you in very solid physical practices that will allow you to walk healthfully for the rest of your life. That’s a big deal. I remember my first T’ai Chi master, Zhu Xilin, talking about what happens when we lose the ability to walk. So much of the aging process really begins to hit home when we’re not able to walk as easily and with as much flexibility. Being able to walk with focused, graceful forward movement helps us to move through life with those same qualities—from a place of deep power, knowing where we’re going and why. It’s simple and yet it works.

None of us should ever take for granted the gift of walking. Through your ChiWalking practice you will be bringing a much-needed mindfulness into the simple act of walking. It presents an opportunity to be respectful of our bodies and respectful in the way we walk through life, if for no other reason than to be a good example for those children who are just taking their first steps. Even you avid walkers can develop a new relationship with walking that allows you to appreciate it more than you ever imagined. It’s like being married to someone for years and then learning about a whole new, deeper part of them that you never knew existed—something that makes you fall in love with them all over again.

The difference with ChiWalking is profound. Here are some letters from clients:

I love to walk in the hills and trails around my home, but I was always feeling that it was too much effort. My legs would feel sluggish and worn out from just a short hike. With the help you gave me, I just can’t believe the difference it has made. It’s as if the hills aren’t there anymore, except I still enjoy the views and the beauty. I can go so much further and so much faster than before . . . I’m really enjoying walking again and am so grateful. —Karen

I had an amazing experience at mile 18 of my marathon walk. I was getting really tired and my legs were really aching. I dreaded the next 8 miles and was wondering if I shouldn’t just stop. I remembered what you said and I really worked on my posture and shortened my stride and leaned forward a bit. At first I didn’t think
I was doing it right, but after a short time I found myself moving along and not feeling the tiredness anymore. I didn’t realize it at first, but by mile 21 I was feeling great again, energized and ready for the next five miles. I wouldn’t say walking the marathon was easy, but I felt pretty great at the end and really thrilled that I’d done it. —Kevin

ChiWalking will teach you to walk in balance and with grace and symmetry. From this place you will feel the power and strength in your body, for when you move in balance, tension is minimized and the flow of your chi is maximized. Eventually, moving with a sense of balance and grace will become more than a way of walking—it will become a way of life.