

As he walks alongside the pool at the Greenhouse Spa in Arlington, Texas, Dr. John Painter looks more like a coach for the Dallas Cowboys than a t'ai chi ch'uan instructor. He's six feet one, 228 pounds, and wearing a red, white, and blue warm-up suit. I expect to see a whistle hanging around his neck, and when he begins to talk, I'm even more convinced. It's J. R. Ewing meets Confucius: Painter is explaining the centuries-old Chinese martial art in a slight Texan twang.

It seems so incongruous this Monday morning as I and about 20 other women assemble poolside for our daily t'ai chi ch'uan lesson. Incongruous, that is, until Painter begins to *move*. Then, for three or four minutes, we are silent. We watch as Painter performs a sequence of fluid, rounded movements. Subtly shifting his weight, he carves the air effortlessly with arms, legs, head, and torso. Everything drops away—the football-player bulk, the Texan accent—until he looks as though he were engaged in an ethereal dance.

"If you have the right mental attitude in t'ai chi," says Painter, whose "Dr." derives from a Ph.D. in naturopathic medicine, "the body relaxes, the mind opens up, and the nervous system becomes calm." Painter has studied t'ai chi for 30 years—taking it up to help battle a childhood thymus condition and headaches—and has written fourteen books on martial arts, including t'ai chi, and Chinese healing methods. The way t'ai chi relaxes us, he explains, is similar to the way yoga or meditation does. By focusing entirely on the movement of the body, the mind is freed from other concerns. (The Chinese believe that these series of movements—there can be more than 100, depending on the style—open the body to *chi*, or the healing life force.)

With us, Painter begins by using a metaphor, asking us to envision a tree branch heavy with snow. As the weight of the snow becomes too much, bellows Painter, the branch bends until finally—*thud!*—the snow falls off. I mimic this, scrunching my shoulders to my ears and feeling the tension and stress in this movement until—*thud!*—I let my shoulders and breath go completely. I begin to relax.

This is what we are here for: to explore how the stress in our lives affects our health. The Greenhouse, an all-women spa, has billed this week as the Mind and Body Connection. It's a week of t'ai chi and yoga classes; Watsu bodywork, a form of underwater shiatsu; and lectures on a subject that couldn't be more timely: the idea that if we can calm our minds, we might also heal our bodies.

From my informal survey, however, I find that most guests—from a Philadelphia art curator to a Louisiana insurance saleswoman—didn't come specifically to learn more about



mind over matter

To be or not to be . . . relaxed—that is the question **Laura Hilgers** finds being answered by spas across the country, where peace-of-mind classes are becoming part of the curriculum

this mind-body idea. No, most are here because this was the rare free week on their calendars. For many of the women—about half are under age 50, half over—the mind-body offerings rank right up there in amusement value with the Tuesday night fashion show. Still, everyone does seem intrigued and agrees it couldn't be more timely.

In recent years researchers like Herbert Benson, M.D., head of Harvard's Deaconess Hospital (and author of *The Relaxation Response*), and Dean Ornish, M.D., assistant professor of internal medicine at the University of California, San Francisco (author of *Dr. Dean Ornish's Program for Reversing Heart Disease*, a diet and mind-body approach to heart disease), have linked mental stress with a variety of ailments, from heart disease to skin irritations to back pain and headaches. And no one has done more to propagate the mind-body theory than journalist Bill Moyers, whose series *Healing and the Mind* on PBS this spring was so successful, it was repeated in August.

Even the stodgy National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, has weighed in on the subject. In March 1992 the N.I.H. opened its first Office of Alternative Medicine to explore the scientific merits of traditional healing methods such as homeopathy and herbal medicine as well as mind-body techniques such as visualization and guided imagery.

But at the Greenhouse—located in a town better known for the Texas Rangers baseball team and the Six Flags Over Texas amusement park than for its meditation chambers—this New Age focus is, well, *new*. Since it opened in 1965, this spa has based its reputation on perfect pampering and top-quality beauty treatments, with a staff of 125 for 39 guests. Rooms are filled with flowers,

beds are covered with hand-embroidered linen and lace—and breakfast is served in bed.

Forget the boot-camp mentality of dawn-to-dusk fitness, or even a meditative spiritual retreat. If anything, the Greenhouse feels like a sorority. Between exercise classes, women are treated to daily massages, facials, manicures, and pedicures; they are driven by chauffeurs for an afternoon of shopping at Stanley Korshak and are encouraged to dress up for their low-cal dinners. (One 30-something woman from Louisiana confessed to me that when she booked in a few years ago, she ate alone in her room every night—so intimidated was she by the dress code.)

Over the past couple of years, however, the atmosphere has become slightly less formal. In addition to attire at dinner being a little less dressy, New Age treatments have been introduced, and Cynthia Lefferts, a top trainer formerly of California's Golden Door, has been brought in to step up the exercise classes. ▶342

To the guests who return year after year, there has been another, more startling, change. Suddenly, there are—gasp!—men teaching at the Greenhouse. Until last year the only males allowed inside this sanctuary were the maître d' and limo drivers.

John Painter, our t'ai chi instructor, is one of the men who now regularly walk through the front door; 37-year-old actor/dancer Larry Lane is another—his Yogarobics class has become a favorite. That's not surprising; Lane is a nationally known instructor who has taught at many renowned spas, including the Rancho La Puerta spa in Mexico.

I take Lane's class every day, right after my facial. Set to New Age music, Yogarobics is what Lane calls "an Americanized version of yoga," active movement combined with yoga postures, with a warm-up of traditional yoga breathing exercises. "Breathing," Lane tells us, "is the link that brings the body and the mind together. If you can really clue in to your breath, you can usually tell where you are mentally."

That's fine, but as Lane takes us through our breathing exercises, I find myself *gasping* for air. (Does *passing out* count for relaxation? I wonder as I attempt to follow him.) Lane—whose high cheekbones and warm green eyes complement his toned body—then leads us through a series of dancelike moves before performing yoga postures. He teases us, telling us to imagine that we are all "wild women," trying to get us to "open" our hips and move. He tortures us, too, asking us to hold yoga postures and stretches about 30 seconds longer than any of us can manage. Finally he guides us through relaxation imagery, for which we are all grateful.

For anyone who considers yoga a gentle, easy exercise, Lane's lesson is a rude awakening. While more calming than a step class, it still provides a real workout. Lane tells the tale of a southern lady—"to the *hilt*," he says—who looked as if she were going to faint in a recent class. He rushed over to ask whether something was wrong. "Why, yes!" she replied, clearly shaken. "I was stah-ting to puh-*spire*."

Puh-spiring aside, Lane tells us his Yogarobics is part of a nationwide trend toward kinder, gentler fitness. "Most Western exercise classes have been geared toward the *bang, bang, bang*, very external, very aggressive side of ourselves," says Lane. "They left us unbalanced. They gave us no time to be introspective, to cool down and begin to get into the softer, more flexible aspects of fitness. Fitness is internal, too, you know."

To some extent, spas and health resorts have led the way in shifting the emphasis toward this "internal" aspect. For instance, for the last eight years, the Golden Door has offered its clients a program called the Inner Door, which includes meditation, silent nature walks, and yoga and t'ai chi classes in addition to its daily aerobics. Last year Canyon Ranch Health and Fitness Resort grouped some of its mind-body sessions together—many of which had been on the agenda for thirteen years—into one department called Spiritual Fitness. The program includes yoga; t'ai chi; meditation; and Chi Kung, an ancient Chinese art that uses breathing exercises to strengthen internal organs and gentle movements to calm the mind. (Consulting for Canyon Ranch is Andrew Weil, M.D., associate director of the division of social perspectives in medicine at the University of Arizona College of Medicine in Tucson, whose best-selling book *Natural Health, Natural Medicine* advocates a mind-body approach to health.) Possibly the funkiest mind-body treatment is the "medicine walk," an activity now available at the Vista Clara spa near Santa Fe. As part of a week-long package, guests are taught to meditate as they walk in the woods for 30 minutes, followed by an hour or two in a Native American sweat lodge, where participants chant and pray while sitting in "purifying steam."

While I am at the Greenhouse, though, I can't imagine any class or treatment more stress relieving than the hour I spend receiving Watsu from Minakshi, a visiting therapist for the Mind and Body Connection week from Harbin Hot Springs spa in northern California. At

five seven and 125 pounds, 44-year-old Minakshi has white-blond hair that sweeps past her shoulders, a sun-worn face, and the calm blue eyes of a woman who has meditated and studied yoga for years. Her penetrating gaze accounts for the name she has chosen for herself: In Sanskrit Minakshi means "beautiful, spiritual eyes."

The Greenhouse is built around a stunning indoor pool covered by a latticed skylight, and it is here that Minakshi works her magic on me. After I slip into the pool, which is body temperature, Minakshi begins to hold me, cradling my neck in one arm, the small of my back in the other, almost as if I were an infant. For the next hour, she will twist me gently, stretch me, massage me, and twirl me through the water, all the while keeping my nose above water. I do nothing other than allow her to move me. My ears are completely submerged; I hear nothing.

Minakshi is surprisingly strong. At Harbin Hot Springs, where she has practiced and taught Watsu for four years, Minakshi sometimes gives the treatments to men twice her weight. Even after hours of working in the pool at the Greenhouse (where the women aren't all lightweights either), the only side effects she suffers are not sore muscles or an aching back but hands shriveled like prunes.

Watsu is a womblike experience—you are floating and being held in a very intimate (although not sexual) way; Minakshi tells me later that people often recall childhood memories or have unexpected emotions during the session. "Part of Watsu is allowing yourself to feel open, to let yourself go," she'll say. "And when you do, something magical happens. There's a healing force involved here."

The first thing I notice, however, is not so profound: Over the course of ten minutes, I count eight planes flying over the lattice-covered skylight. Although there's no sound of planes, the Greenhouse, I realize, must be in the flight pattern for the Dallas/Fort Worth airport.

I close my eyes . . . and as I relax more deeply, my mind does begin to wander. Submerged in water, I remember that as a child I used to dive into the pool in my family's backyard and just sit on the floor of the deep end, staring up at the sun filtering through. For 30 or 45 seconds, I would pretend that I lived underwater, far from the world's noises or cares. It is a blissful memory—one that I experience before Minakshi tells me such memories are common—and I am overcome by a peace I haven't felt in years. I forget about the business trips, deadlines, and meetings that have filled my head. And when I emerge from the pool, my shoulders feel lighter; my chest, more . . . more "open."

It's not what I expected, here in the home of the Texas Rangers and t'ai chi instructors who look like football coaches. True, I had come to explore this idea, already fairly convinced of the power behind a mind and body connection. Five years ago, in a very stressful job, I landed in Manhattan's Lenox Hill Hospital with pneumonia and, during my recovery, began experimenting with meditation and yoga to try to counterbalance the fast pace of my life. My experiment had little scientific basis, but it worked: My mind grew calmer, my body grew healthier, and my job grew more tolerable. So here, at the Greenhouse, I don't try to fathom how and why mind and body connecting help, but why these kinds of programs aren't being implemented everywhere.

With each passing day, cloistered in this sanctuary under the flight pattern, I am surprised by how much better my body is beginning to feel, and I can see the tension in my face lessening, too. Maybe I feel healthier because I haven't had to take business calls or because I've had the luxury of being served breakfast in bed, but I think there's more to it than that. Certainly, after my Watsu, I think Minakshi has had a hand in it.

As I crawl under my lace-and-linen bedspread, I realize that—with the right teachers, in the right atmosphere—this sort of mind-calming, healing experience could happen anywhere.

Even in Texas. ●