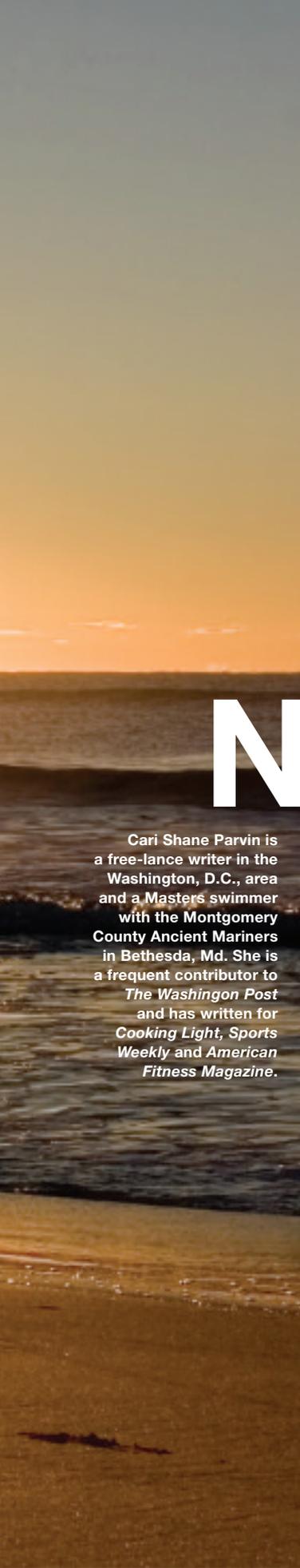


THE ZEN OF SWIM

by Cari Shane Parvin

Perspectives
on How to Be
the Water



Lise Gagne

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Cari Shane Parvin is a free-lance writer in the Washington, D.C., area and a Masters swimmer with the Montgomery County Ancient Mariners in Bethesda, Md. She is a frequent contributor to *The Washington Post* and has written for *Cooking Light*, *Sports Weekly* and *American Fitness Magazine*.

ancy Steadman Martin started taking Bikram yoga classes about a year before she successfully completed her first English Channel swim in August 2004. Besides her training partner Michelle Davidson (who also had a successful Channel swim that same month), Martin credits yoga for her successful journey.

Initially, Martin got into yoga (specifically Bikram, or hot yoga) because she needed an exercise regimen to replace running, which had left her injured. She was looking for physical exercise, something to build up her strength and flexibility to help propel her across the Channel.

From a physical standpoint, Bikram yoga was the perfect balance for Martin's cold-water training. After swimming miles in icy water, Martin, frozen to the core, would stretch her muscles, ligaments and tendons in the 106-degree yoga room.

But what Martin didn't expect from this physical practice was the spiritual enlightenment, self-realization or mental strength that she attained through yoga.

"Yoga conditioned my mind," says Martin, a 51-year-old attorney from Oceanpoint, N.J.,

who swims with Garden State Masters. During the Channel swim, she "started a mantra of left arm, right arm. I concentrated on my breathing. I hadn't [originally] turned to yoga for mental strength, but that's what it gave me."

Martin found the authentic meaning of yoga: "a spiritual system with a physical component," according to the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, the most authoritative text on authentic yoga written in the 13th century. It goes on to say that the true focus of yoga is "the higher state of consciousness." Yoga is actually about spirituality, not physicality.

As Martin discovered circuitously but experts have always been straightforward about, it is mental strength that separates the good athletes from the great ones. Martin's name entered the Channel record books not necessarily because of her ability to swim well, she notes, but because of her mental fortitude.

The problem is, many of us often forget about the mental component of swimming. We take to the water counting sets and times, racing the clock and competing with our swim

partners or lane mates, thinking about the next set and whether we'll have enough time to get it all in before we need to get out.

The result? We miss out on the Zen, the meditative high that is achieved when, like fish, we learn to stop fighting and become one with the water—trite sounding but as true as can be.

We can attain Zen—the art of doing and not doing—when we concentrate on the feeling of water gushing past us, caressing our limbs and muscles. We can attain that Zen if we allow the water to cradle us, warm us; when the roll of our body and rhythmic breathing leaves us relishing the moment rather than wondering when the set will end.

To help you achieve Zen—or get into the zone in the pool—we've enlisted the help of some experts in conditioning the mind, those who practice yoga, Tai Chi, Qigong, Reiki and meditation.

Most of us know that physical exercise is a necessity. We're swimmers, we get it. Just to review: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that adults take part in moderate activity

Paulus Ruyvanto

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30 minutes a day, five days a week or vigorous activity three days a week for 20 minutes or more. As swimmers, it's likely that's taken care of.

But what about mental exercise? There are actually recommendations in place for keeping up with mental fitness, too. The problem is "physical fitness" hired the better PR agency, so more people know the rules for keeping their body healthy. That said, the recommendations do exist and should not be ignored.

According to Frank Staggers Jr., an M.D. with the Haight

Ashbury Free Clinic in San Francisco who has worked extensively with the National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH), we can only be truly physically healthy if we also focus on our mental fitness.

Staggers, who recently released a National Institutes of Health study on the positive effects of transcendental meditation on high blood pressure, recommends we spend 20 minutes, two times a day in deep mental relaxation. "Restful alertness is the goal," says Staggers, who explains that during meditation the metabolic rate drops lower than during sleep, oxygen consumption is reduced and the body can literally "gas up" or re-energize. "A person who meditates is able to mobilize their mind and body more effectively because they are coming from a better physiological state," he says. "They are healthier."

When you're in a stressed-out state, the body responds with a "flight or fight" mechanism, hormones kick in and the metabolism speeds up. The mind starts racing and the body fuels itself by breaking down tissue, constricting blood vessels and hiking blood sugar.

So what does all this have to do with swimming?

Enter a pool in a stressed state and "it's like trying to race a broken-down car," says Staggers. In other words, Zen will be elusive. "You cannot enjoy the swimming experience with a confused mind," he suggests.

The counter to stress response, says Staggers, is the relaxation response. Although Staggers recommends meditation (deep, awake relaxation and restfulness), other inner art forms can be used to re-energize the body. The whole idea is to enter the pool relaxed so you are able to "mobilize your mind and body. You can appreciate and be more aware of your body. You are at a higher performance plane," Staggers says. "If you

enter the pool [relaxed] you will have a clearer mind."

Like meditation, Tai Chi puts the mind at rest. Triathlete and Tai Chi instructor Paul Rischard of Springfield, Va., says, "Tai Chi is like swimming in air." Practitioners of Tai Chi repeat the same movements over and over again, much like the swimmer with his stroke. The goal in Tai Chi is to empty the mind, to no longer think about how to move. At that point "your mind clicks off... you've anesthetized the mind," says Rischard, 58, who is also a public school teacher. Similarly, the swimmer practices the same movements until the stroke becomes so natural that he is "doing not doing, or 'wei wu wei' (pronounced "way woo way"). That's when the work is done, that's when you achieve the zone," says Rischard. That's Zen, the art of doing and not doing.

After mastering the concept of Tai Chi, Rischard says practitioners flow naturally into the ancient art of Qigong (pronounced "chi gong"), moving meditation, a 5,000-year-old tradition that hails from China. As with Tai Chi and meditation, Qigong can help bring about a quieter mind and help release tension. Qigong, according to Liz Cournoyer, who has been teaching the inner art for three years in Rockville, Md., is about the moment—specifically, being in the moment. In other words, when practicing Qigong, the past and the future do not exist.

Cournoyer, 50, says the concept is extremely important and helpful to the athlete looking to achieve Zen. Swimmers who practice Qigong "mentally go into the rhythm of their activity and become more aware of their activity," enabling themselves to attain a more relaxed rhythmic experience, she explains. Instead of thinking about when the set is going to end, the Qigong swimmer is able to stay focused on the

YOGA OPTIONS FOR YOU

There are many styles of yoga to meet individual needs and preference. Yoga seeks to build flexibility, strength and sensitivity in mind, body and spirit. For more detailed information, visit www.yoga.com and www.abc-of-yoga.com.

••• **Iyengar:** This classical method of yoga entails in-depth study of *asanas* (postures, or poses), with emphasis on body alignment, and *pranayama* (breath control). There are more than 200 classical yoga asanas and 14 types or variations of pranayamas, progressing from the simple to the incredibly difficult. Regular practice of Iyengar yoga will integrate the body, mind and emotions.

••• **Hatha:** The basis for many other forms of yoga, this physical regimen involves a series of asanas, breathing practices, deep relaxation and meditation to strengthen, open and cleanse the body. Poses flow at a comfortable pace, preparing the body for the spiritual path.

••• **Anusara:** An outgrowth of Iyengar yoga with a philosophy of focusing on the divine. The poses in Anusara Yoga are considered to be "heart-oriented," meaning that they are expressed from the "inside out." Instead of trying to control the body and mind from the outside, the poses originate from a deep creative and devotional feeling inside.

••• **Ashtanga:** "Power" yoga. Often, a preferred choice of athletes, this style of yoga is light on meditation, heavy on strength and stamina, with synchronous breathing and strong, flowing movement.

••• **Bikram:** "Hot" yoga practice takes place in a 100-degree Fahrenheit room and involves 26 postures completed in order. It is a physical, high-intensity yoga.

••• **Kripalu:** Spontaneous, flowing meditation.

••• **Kundalini:** This style is intended to activate energy in the spine through mantras, meditations, visualization and guided relaxation.

••• **Mantra:** "Yoga of potent sound." Liberation through mental and verbal repetition.

••• **Raja:** "Liberation through meditation." This yoga entails intense concentration.

••• **Vini:** Individualized yoga that's considered ideal for beginners.

motion of swimming.

Even further, Rischard says, when you have reached Zen with the help of Tai Chi or Qigong, “you are no longer doing swimming—swimming is doing you. That’s when you achieve the zone. The Zen master swim coach will tell the swimmer to *be* the stroke, to *be* the pool. You have to stop fighting with the water; we are already 70 percent water. You need to stop fighting yourself.”

Bryn Durham, a swimmer from Cambridge, Mass., wholly agrees with Rischard, though he practices Reiki, a system of natural healing that originated in Japan. Also a stress reducer, Reiki (pronounced “ray-ki”) relies on a person’s ability to “tap into an unlimited supply of ‘life force energy’ to improve health and enhance the quality of life,” according to the web site, www.reiki.org. Unlike the other inner art forms, though, Reiki is an actual treatment that one person performs on another, much like massage.

Durham, 49, who swims about four days a week, brings the concept of Reiki into the pool with him. “When I allow myself to get into a meditative state, I feel the water streaming down my body. When I become focused on the event, there’s no separation between the doing and the receiving. The Zen part is, you really get a sense of unity with the breathing and the water. You really feel like you’re not doing it, that it’s doing you. It’s a powerful element.”

Terry Laughlin of New Paltz, N.Y., founder of the Total Immersion swim method, says yoga also enables swimmers to reach their Zen in the pool. Like yoga, “swimming is made up of a series of positions,” he notes. “Once you get this, you can swim with a lot more flow and energy.” Similarly, there’s a tremendous emphasis on breathing in both yoga and swimming. And finally, the mindfulness of yoga, is a key swim element.

Laughlin, 54, says swimmers

“need to move away from the mentality of ‘how much I’ve done.’ When you go to yoga sessions, you don’t think about how many positions you’ve done, you are focused on the details of that position,” he notes, and that’s how you reach the spiritual perspective that yoga is intended to bring you.

Whether it’s through yoga, Reiki, Tai Chi, Qigong or meditation practice, Zen can be achieved while swimming. Does it matter which of these perspectives you take with you to the pool? Not at all, says Cournoyer. “Each person has a different interest. I don’t think it matters which practice you pick up. It just matters that you do the practice. It will help—not just in swimming, but in life.” <<<



Leah-Anne Thompson

GETTING IN TOUCH WITH YOUR ZEN

Swimmers have numerous options for developing a stronger mind/body connection that will yield benefits in and out of the pool.

••• Transcendental Meditation

New research published in the *American Journal of Hypertension* shows that transcendental meditation reduces high blood pressure. Frank Staggars Jr., M.D., co-author of the study, which was funded in part by the National Institutes of Health, says that diet, exercise, early detection and meditation all play a role in preventing and treating high blood pressure.

The transcendental meditation technique, like yoga, comes from the Vedic tradition of India. Meditation settles the mind and brings it to the least excited state of consciousness. The practice does not require any particular faith or belief. For more information, visit www.tm.org.

••• Tai Chi and Qigong

Tai Chi and Qigong are ancient systems of biofeedback and classical conditioning. Some 2,000 years ago, traditional Chinese doctors created Tai Chi and Qigong exercises to train the mind and body to continually dump stress and change the way the mind and body handle future stress.

With Tai Chi, practitioners work through slow-motion movements, calming their minds, deepening relaxation and slowing their muscles. Visit www.wuweitaichi.org for more information and links to Tai Chi web sites.

Qigong is like Tai Chi but simpler. It is practiced by 10 million Chinese daily, although in the United States it’s not as well-known as Tai Chi. Qigong is a form of moving meditation that returns the practitioner to a natural state of being. For more information on Qigong and its various forms, as well as more on how it differs from Tai Chi, visit www.peaceabledragon.org.

••• Reiki

Reiki is a hands-on technique for stress reduction and a method of spiritual healing. It is based on the Japanese concept of Ki, or life force, which is better known by its Chinese name, Chi.

Reiki is known for energy enhancement, pain reduction, relaxation and healing. It seeks to raise the vibratory level of the energy field in and around the physical body where negative thoughts and feelings are attached. This causes negative energy to break apart and fall away. In so doing, Reiki clears, straightens and heals the energy pathways, thus allowing the life force to flow in a healthy and natural way. Reiki treats the whole person including body, emotions, mind and spirit, and creates many beneficial effects including feelings of peace, security and well being. For more information, visit www.reiki.org.