



HEALTH / SCIENCE

Enlisting the mind in body's fight against cancer

Man turns to Tai Chi to help
turn back disease three times

By **PAUL CHOINIERE**
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BOB ELLAL DID NOT KNOW HOW TO feel when, in 1993, a doctor told him that his lymphoma cancer had returned. Ellal, married and the father of two young boys, thought a regimen of chemotherapy had defeated the cancer that was found in his right hip and pelvis two years earlier.

Now it had been found in the left hip.

"Quite frankly, you don't know what to feel," Ellal, now 39, recalled. "Scared? Yeah. And discouraged. But you have to go on."

Ellal said he soon realized that to fight this latest battle he wanted more than what traditional Western medicine had to offer.

He had dabbled in the martial arts; his training in Kung Fu had left him familiar

with the Eastern emphasis on the connections among mind, body and spirit. So Ellal was intrigued when he read that Chi Kung, a form of Tai Chi, could help in healing.

His inquiries led him to Ramel Ronés, a Tai Chi expert with a most unlikely background. Born in Israel, Ronés turned to Tai Chi at age 16 as a method of dealing with severe digestive problems and muscle spasms. The movements of Tai Chi worked where traditional efforts had failed.

Griswold

He continued his practice of Tai Chi while serving in the Israeli Army and in 1983 immigrated to Boston. There he began to study under Yang Jwing Ming, a Tai Chi master. Fourteen years later he continues to learn under Yang and teaches at several of Yang's instructional schools, including Yang's Martial Arts Association on Pierce Street in Westerly.

Ronés said he has become increasingly interested in the connection between Tai Chi and health. He has worked with hundreds of elderly people who report that they move with less pain, have more energy and greater flexibility as a result of their practice of Tai Chi. A 1996 study published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* determined that senior citizens who practiced Tai Chi suffered 48 percent fewer falls than the general population of the same age.

Yet Ronés wanted bigger challenges to demonstrate that Tai Chi could have a significant effect on health.

"There was no bigger challenge than cancer," said Ronés.

No promises

Ellal said that in their first meeting, Ronés made two things clear: He could not promise that the practice of Tai Chi would have any effect on his cancer; and he insisted Ellal continue the treatment recommended by his doctors.

ALTERNATIVES



■ *Left, Bob Ellal gets instruction from tai chi master Ramel Ronés as he adopts a meditative pose.*

Robin Shotoia
The Day

"I don't suggest that the Eastern methods should replace Western medicine. I feel the two need to be merged," Ronés said.

In the four years since his initial meeting with Ronés, Ellal has had the cancer return twice more and successfully fought it off both times. He is convinced that Tai Chi has allowed him to continue a fight he otherwise would have lost long ago.

Ronés has taught Ellal the meditative practices of Chi Kung, a form of Tai Chi. The process is used to "focus energy" on the diseased area, Ronés said.

Dr. Stacy R. Nerenstone, Ellal's primary physician during his long fight with cancer, said Ellal has beaten stiff odds by successfully undergoing cancer treatment so many times.

A form of meditation that Ellal now uses almost daily is called "embracing the tree." Ellal stands, feet shoulder width apart, holding his arms in a circle as if holding a tree. As he increased the time spent in this position, sometimes as long as 45 minutes, Ellal experienced a shaking that began in the soles of his feet and moved to his head. He would envision negative energy leaving his body in this fashion.

Tai Chi gives man extra weapon in war against cancer

Ellal said he often meditates in the woods near his Griswold home.

"There is a special peace there. You feel one with the energy of the world, the universe," he said.

Another exercise is called "white crane." Ellal slowly rocks, first moving his chest and spine. Eventually the arms, hands and entire upper body swings and turns from the waist.

All the exercises involve constant, unified motions that often mimic the movements of animals.

Rones said Tai Chi provides his students with a chance to be proactive. Rather than being the victims of cancer, they are its opponents.

"When your foe is cancer you must have the spirit of the warrior, you're in battle. Be proud of the fight," Rones said.

Ellal recalled that one time, while in a meditative state, he suddenly envisioned a rhinoceros charging, its horn ripping into the cancerous tumor. He has also envisioned a propeller-like blade spinning in his chest, attacking the cancer. Ellal has pictured a pair of hands, containing a ball of healing light within them.

Verge of despair

Ellal's cancer returned for a third time in 1995 when a tumor was discovered in his right shoulder.

In treating the cancer when it returned the second time, doctors had used what is still a relatively new type of bone transplant called a stem cell transplant. Doctors remove young, healthy cells from the bone marrow before the chemotherapy treatment begins. They are then reintroduced and the body, hopefully, begins its recovery.

Dr. Nerenstone said there was skepticism that the treatment would be successful a second time.

"Most people go through it once and, if they relapse, it doesn't work," Nerenstone said. "In Bob's case we decided to try using an extremely high dose (of chemo)."

Ellal said the treatment was difficult, there was vomiting, hair loss, fatigue.

"It was very hard on the body and nerves, and on my family. At times, you wonder, can I survive this? It was often a difficult challenge just to get from the bed to a chair," he said.

Through it all he continued his meditation. Rones modified the movements so they could be done sitting or lying down.

And the treatment worked.

"The doctors were pretty much shocked. I was elated," said Ellal. "To me it was a further indication the meditation was helping my immune system."

Then, in July 1996, a small tumor was found on a disc in Ellal's back.

"I was, for a few days, on the verge

of despair," Ellal recalls. "It was hard on my wife, the kids. You have to have something to fall back on when your will to fight is eroded."

Ellal said he continued to call upon the energy he feels is moving through all things in this universe.

"Call it God, the Spirit, I just know there is something more than the physical. That there is some greater purpose for us being here," he said.

Having caught his latest cancer in an early stage, doctors felt it could be treated with traditional chemotherapy and radiation treatment. Again the cancer was eradicated.

Mind and body

Nerenstone said it is clear that there is some type of mind and body connection. Patients with a more positive attitude tend to do better. Chemotherapy is hard, and having something to cling to — be it a strong religious belief, meditation, or Tai Chi — can assist in the struggle, she said.

But how strong the mind and body connection is, and how it works, are things science cannot yet answer, she said.

Several studies have demonstrated a connection. In one study of women found to have breast cancer, those who received psychotherapy in groups survived nearly twice as long as similar women who did not. Research by the Preventive Medicine Research Institute in Sausalito, Calif., has produced evidence that a program of group meetings, exercise, low-fat diet and meditation is effective in reversing coronary-artery blockage.

Though the threat of cancer continues to hang over him, Ellal said his outlook remains positive.

"The cancer is likely to return and he knows that," his doctor said.

"You try not to think about that. You try to live your life," Ellal responded.

Rones said that of the 25 cancer patients he has assisted, several have died.

"But I take solace from the fact that during the period they were training it made their life-quality better. They were emotionally and physically more empowered than likely would have been the case oth-

erwise," Rones said. "These experiences have reinforced my belief that there is more to life than the physical being. The more we become in tune with that, the better off we all will be."