

# Culture Mandala: The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies

The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies

---

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 7

---

January 2003

## Making the Spirit Sing: A review of Trevor Carolan's Return to Stillness: Twenty years with a Tai Chi Master

R. James Ferguson

Bond University, james\_ferguson@bond.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.bond.edu.au/cm>

---

### Recommended Citation

Ferguson, R. James (2003) "Making the Spirit Sing: A review of Trevor Carolan's Return to Stillness: Twenty years with a Tai Chi Master," *Culture Mandala: The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 7.  
Available at: <http://epublications.bond.edu.au/cm/vol6/iss1/7>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies at [ePublications@bond](mailto:ePublications@bond). It has been accepted for inclusion in *Culture Mandala: The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies* by an authorized administrator of [ePublications@bond](mailto:ePublications@bond). For more information, please contact [Bond University's Repository Coordinator](#).

---

# Making the Spirit Sing: A review of Trevor Carolan's Return to Stillness: Twenty years with a Tai Chi Master

**Abstract**

Highly recommended for beginners and adepts, students of Asian philosophies and martial arts, or those simply wishing to expand their horizon of understanding.

Carolan, T. (2003) Return to Stillness: Twenty years with a Tai Chi Master, New York, Marlowe & Company. ISBN: 1569244871

**Keywords**

Tai chi, teacher-student relationships, philosophy

*The Culture Mandala*, 6 no. 1: Copyright © R. James Ferguson 2003

## **Making the Spirit Sing:**

**A Review of Trevor Carolan's *Return to Stillness*:**

***Twenty Years with a Tai Chi Master* (N.Y., Marlowe & Company, 2003)**

*by R. James Ferguson*

As a scholar, poet and practitioner of Taoist martial and healing arts, Trevor Carolan achieves his aim of providing the reader with a 'fresh and deeper understanding of the *why, how, and in what spirit* a traditional Tai Chi master's movements are informed by this ancient wisdom path'. Much more than slow-motion callisthenics, Tai Chi is the play of a deep philosophy addressing life's joy, challenges, and ever-changing realities. The art crosses national and language barriers and has found its home not just in China, but throughout the world, not least in Southeast Asia, Canada, Europe, the United States and Australasia. Nor is Tai Chi just about the mastery of rigid set forms, a point clearly made in the first chapter of *Return to Stillness*. Trevor Carolan shows the deep relationship between Tai Chi, Taoism, and what the West has come to know as Zen Buddhism. Chapters 2, 4, and 5, in particular, provide a succinct, well-written account of Tai Chi Chuan in the wider context of Chinese culture.

*Return to Stillness* then moves on to a comprehensive, if concise, account of Tai Chi based on 29 insightful chapters, ranging from the 'Spirit of Tao' and 'Understanding Chi' through to 'Tai Chi as Self Defence' and 'Tai Chi Sword'. The book progressively moves towards a personal meditation on the deep transmission of knowledge and mutual concern between master and student for some twenty-three years. Carolan's work is in part a dedication to the wisdom of Master Ng Ching-Por, his teacher (*Sifu*) and friend, but also a wider dialogue with other great 'dharma teachers' including the Dalai Lama, Kalu Rinpoche and Allen Ginsberg.

These are indeed 'palm of the hand tales', concise 'epiphanies' set in short, witty chapters. But as the Christian knows, the whole world can be held in the palm of the hand, and as the Chinese saying has it, ruling the world is like frying small fish: neither must be overdone. This is precisely what Trevor Carolan achieves in an apparently light, lively, and personal account. Although scholars may debate some of the finer historical points, the core experience of Tai Chi is here, conveyed with humour, realism, and understated reverence. The work avoids the slavish adoration of some books that misconstrue Chinese martial arts as a form of cult on the one hand, or as a competitive path to superhuman abilities on the other. On the contrary, Carolan shows that with patience and an open mind, these arts are open to all humans who want to live a long, full, and enriched human life. Tai Chi, approached in this way, does indeed 'Make the Spirit Sing'.

Highly recommended for beginners and adepts, students of Asian philosophies and marital arts, or those simply wishing to expand their horizon of understanding.

***The Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies,***

**The School of Humanities and Social Sciences,**

**[Bond University](#), Queensland, Australia**