

From *The Tai Chi Way to Better Balance*



An Introduction to Rooting & Stability



By Don Ethan Miller
Presented by DanKleiman.com

An Introduction to Rooting and Stability Training

In this course, you will be introduced to the ancient Chinese method for gaining, or re-gaining, one of life's simplest yet most essential treasures — the gift of balance.

The three Tai Chi Balance Exercises by themselves form a beginning program that will produce a noticeable improvement in your sense of being grounded, or connected to the earth, centrally stabilized around a vertical axis, and able to change visual orientation while remaining balanced.

As you practice these exercises, you will begin to feel and understand the essential Tai Chi concepts of Rooting, Central Equilibrium, and Dragon Body.

The exercises are drawn from the more than 45 separate exercises contained in the complete Tai Chi Way to Better Balance program, which includes both an E-book and DVDs.

To learn more about the program, please visit: DanKleiman.com/Better-Balance.



A Personal Note from Don Ethan Miller

The exercises that you are about to try represent the distillation of my four decades of study and practice in Tai Chi and other martial arts, specifically applied to issues of balance, equilibrium and stability-in-motion.

I encourage you to take the time to try the three exercises, note their effects (I guarantee you there will be some!) and to share this program with friends and others who might need it.

Please feel free to contact me at donmillertaichi@gmail.com with any questions, reports, realizations or revelations you may have.

With my warmest Tai Chi regards,

- Don Ethan Miller

40 year Tai Chi master-practitioner and 4-time Tai Chi Tuishou National Champion.



Tai Chi and Balance

Tai Chi masters are known for maintaining vitality, balance and mobility well into old age. My first Tai Chi teacher, T.T. Liang, lived to be 102, and in his mid-eighties was still throwing young, large guys around in the Tai Chi game — somewhat akin to upright grappling or sumo — called “push hands” (tuishou).

His consummate skill with Chinese weapons—sword, cutlass, staff, spear — was still evident well into his 90’s.

In the ten years I studied with him, I cannot say I ever saw Master Liang lose his balance. What is more, I learned much later that he was practicing Tai Chi on severely compromised feet, permanently damaged by the horrendous torture he endured at the hands of the Japanese during WWII.

Many other Tai Chi masters are notable for their sustained “youthfulness” of the legs and hips, supple and strong in the decades when many are becoming stiff and weak.

Some of these effects are probably the result of simply continuing to exercise and move around, in fairly complex ways, and never “retiring” from movement. But they are also, I believe, in large part the embodiment of 3 major Tai Chi Principles, that are central to the art and developed fully over many decades of practice. These 3 Principles — Rooting, Central Equilibrium, and The Dragon Body — are critical components of attaining, maintaining, and/or regaining excellent balance, and they underlie the exercises we will presenting in this book.



The eminent Liang Tung Tsai, performs the Tai Chi posture “Golden Rooster”, sometime in his late 80’s.

Rooting



Photo: Jonathan Sloman

Rooting means connecting to the earth, not only physically but also energetically, mentally, even spiritually. In the West we have the concept of being “grounded”, but Tai Chi goes further. To be rooted means that, while we do not have actual physical roots like trees or other members of the plant kingdom, some essential aspect of ourselves is intertwined with the geography we inhabit, with nature, with the magnetic core of the earth. There are specific practices which enhance and develop these qualities, and they are found in Tai Chi more than in any other art. Indeed, it is often said that “Without rooting, there is no Tai Chi”. Someone who is rooted is not only physically but psychologically stable, less prone to being imbalanced by the winds of circumstance, emotion, stress, the constant changes of external events. Rooting gives Tai Chi its unique combination of calmness and power, strength and relaxation.

Another way to look at rooting is neurological: in modern society, for most people, the vast majority of actions and interactions are conducted using (primarily) the neuromuscular circuitry connecting the hands and arms, the eyes, the mouth and tongue, and the brain. We drive, we type, we text, we talk into smart phones, we cook meals — almost all the activities of daily life involve utilizing the circuitry to the upper quarter of the body. But we use other areas of our neural circuitry — those involving our legs, feet, torso, hips, and backs — far less than our ancestors did just a few generations ago; and remarkably less than the real “human animal” body (which evolved to its present form about 100,000 years ago) was designed for.

In the neurological sense, we have “turned the hourglass upside down.”

Rooting rectifies this imbalance, by getting us back into our feet, our legs, back, and hips, and minimizing, at least for awhile, our reliance on the eye-hand-head circuitry. In terms of simple biological functions, it is the reactivation of the natural support, propulsion, and adaptation circuitry of the whole body. We get to turn the neurological hourglass back, the way it was designed, and the result is both greater physical stability, and greater psychological balance.



The great Willem de Thouars, master of internal and external martial arts, demonstrates rooting of body, mind, and spirit.

APE CONTEMPLATES THE VOID



This exercise produces an almost-immediate increase in the feeling of being connected to the ground, like a tree with strong roots extending deep into the earth. You do not have to practice for many years to get this effect. Try it right now, and see.

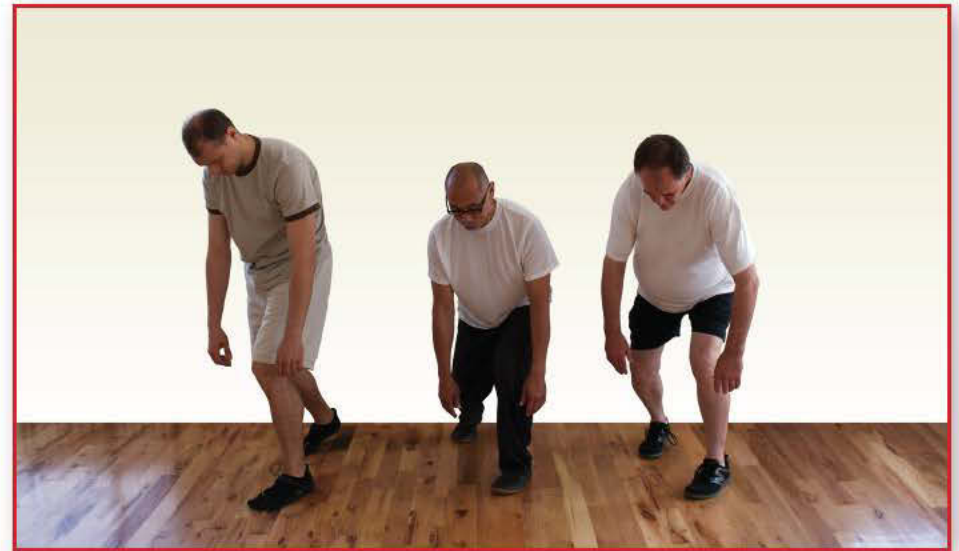
- From a normal standing position, shift all the weight to one leg, and move the unweighted foot back 2-6 inches.
- Lift the heel of that foot off the ground, keeping contact through the ball and toes.
- Slowly sink your weight—by bending both at the hip joint and the knee—several inches, as if you were beginning to crouch under a tree limb just below head height.

NOTE: Please do not lower your body by just bending the knee, as this puts excessive strain on the knee joint and makes you much more susceptible to mis-alignments of the leg that can be both painful and damaging.

- Stop and hold the lowered position, leaving your arms loose and trying to relax your back and neck as much as possible. Breathe. You will feel your leg and hip muscles working, this is good! (But you should not feel pain in your knee or any other joint. If you do, try going down less — perhaps an inch or so from the starting position.)
- Maintain this position, initially for just 30 seconds or so; then slowly stand up, without taking the weight off the foot. Pause for a few moments, feeling the muscular/energetic changes in an upright position.
- Now, bring the rear foot up and return to a parallel stance. Slowly shift your weight to the other foot a few inches back, sink down on that side

(again, only a few inches or whatever is comfortable), and hold the posture again.

- When the second leg is “cooked”, slowly stand and bring feet to parallel. And stand.



How do you feel standing now, as opposed to before the exercise? If you are like most people, you will feel quite different—legs perhaps heavy, stance more stable, as if you were connected into the earth, upper body free-er and more relaxed. Welcome to Tai Chi rooting!

As you progress, you can do 2, 3, or more “rounds” of the Ape Contemplates the Void exercise (equal time on both legs, please); and you can extend the length of time you spend in the stance each round. If you can do 3 rounds of 1 minute on each side, or a single round of 2-3 minutes (each side), comfortably, you will have made a significant beginning in developing root, strengthening your legs, and improving your stability.



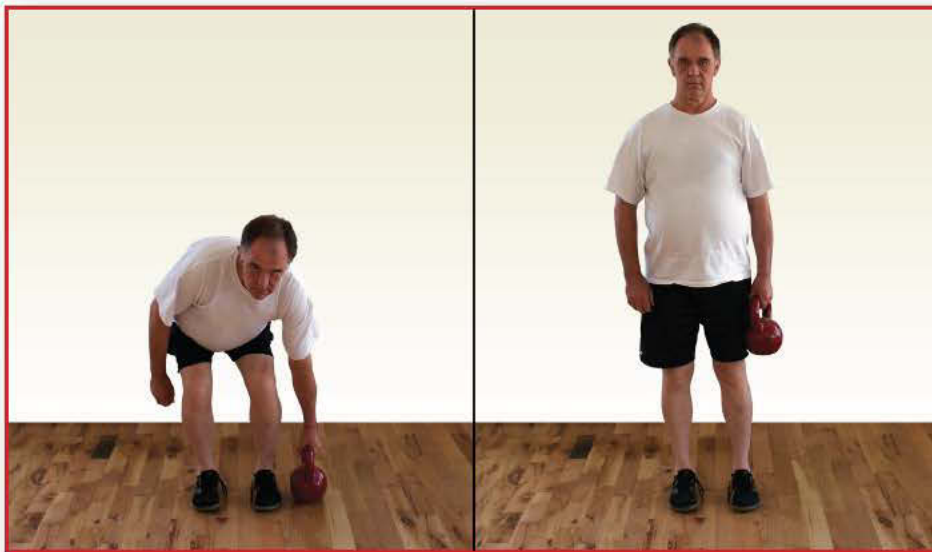
In a two-person Tai Chi Rooting exercise, Don “receives” Ted’s push into his rear leg, maintaining stability in response to an outside force.

ASYMMETRICAL WEIGHT HOLD

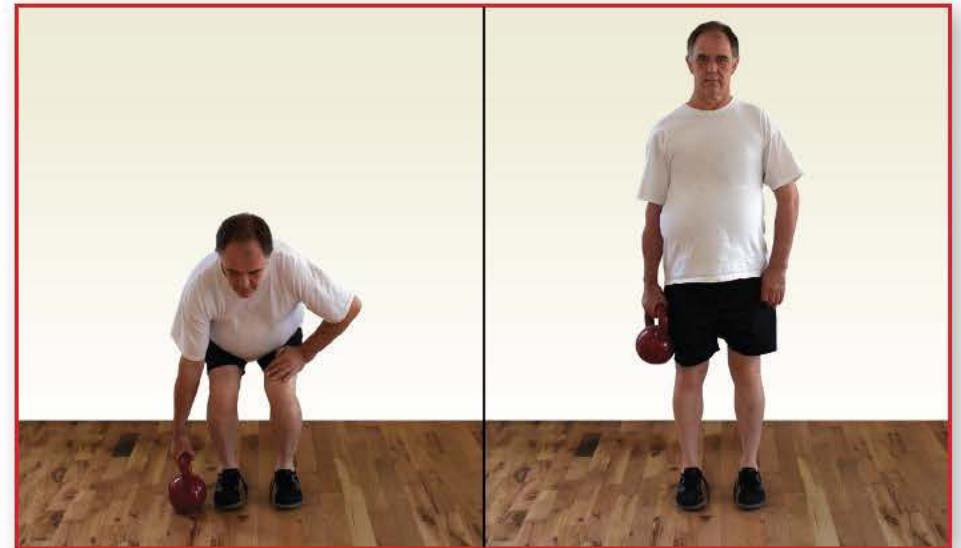


This exercise also works very rapidly to give you the sense of having a strong centerline, like a tentpole with guy-wires supporting it on either side. This is the Tai Chi quality called *Zhong Ding*, or Central Equilibrium. In daily life we move, carry, hold, catch, and transfer objects of varying sizes and weights, and these pose a unique type of challenge to our equilibrium, as the body has to adapt to an additional weight outside itself. You will need a moderately heavy object, such as a dumbbell weight or suitcase weighing between 10 and 50 pounds.

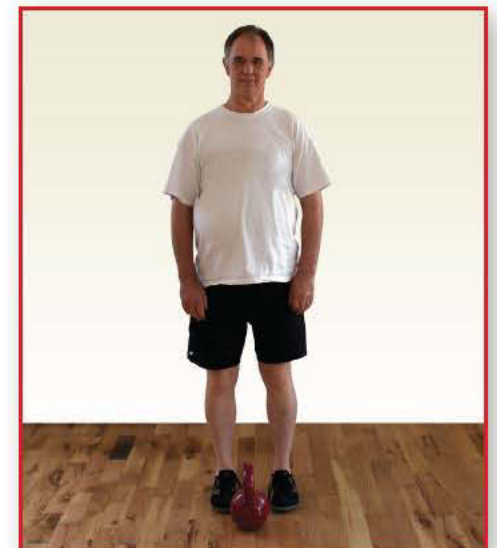
1. Stand in a parallel stance, bend from hips and knees, and lift a loaded suitcase or kettlebell or dumbbell with one hand, SLOWLY moving it from the floor (or whatever surface it rests on) to an upright standing position, with the weight as close to your body as possible. Try to stand straight, and do not lean the body either away from or on the same side as the weight.
2. Pause, standing upright, and breathe for several long breaths, trying to get your body to adjust to the weight and become as comfortable as possible. Feel your feet, your legs, your trunk, the top of your head. Become stable in an upright, balanced posture, with the added weight.



5. Repeat the same process with your other hand, bringing the weight to the opposite side of your body. Remember to take several breaths to accommodate the weight and stabilize your body while holding it close to you.

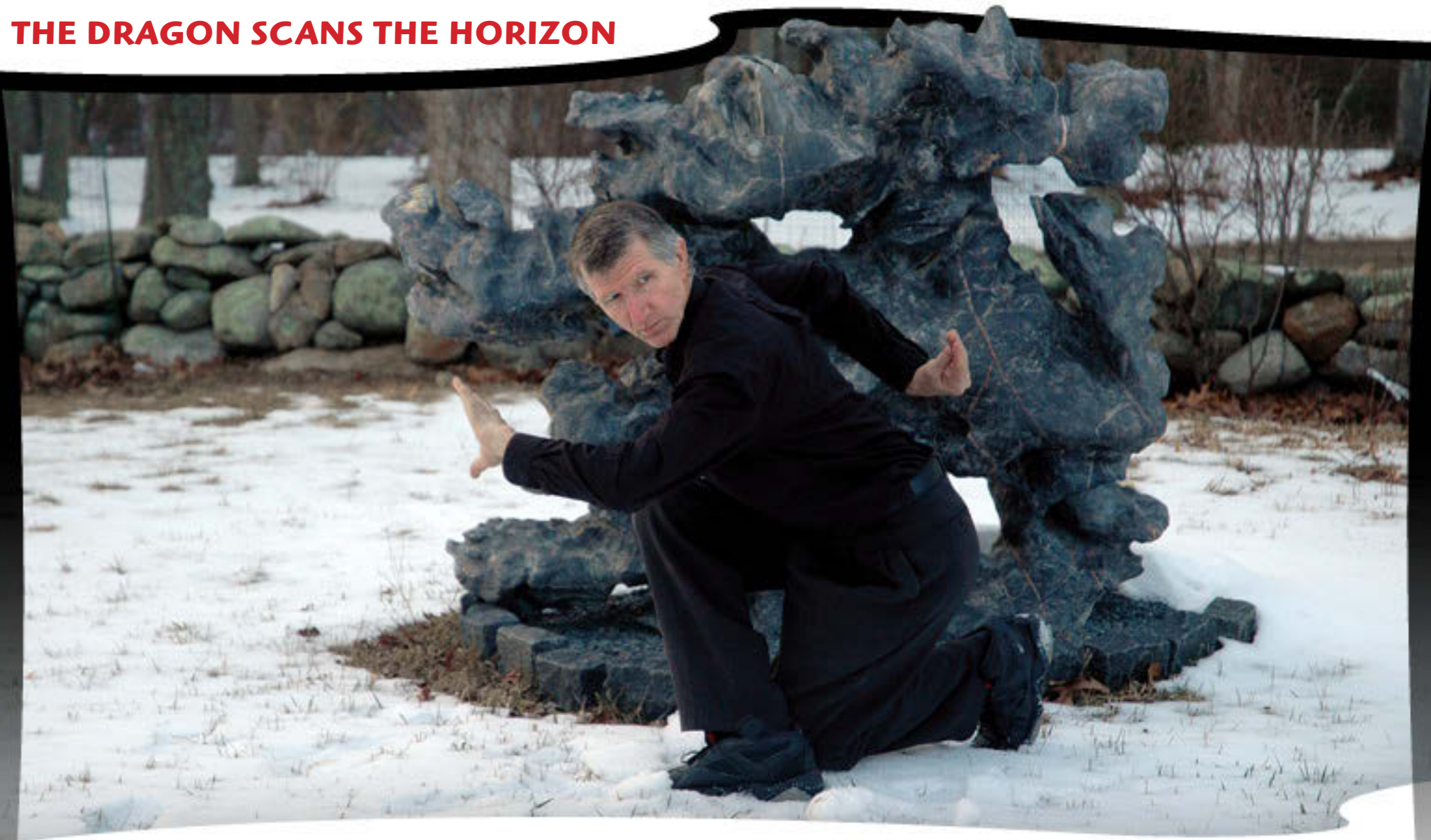


6. Slowly put down the weight and stand up. Note how you feel now.



3. SLOWLY fold and lower the weight to the ground.
4. Stand and return to the parallel stance.

THE DRAGON SCANS THE HORIZON



In Tai Chi, the “Dragon” refers to the twisting and turning motions made with the body, usually in support of the turning of the head and neck, as when we change the direction of our gaze. Learning to turn the head correctly, supported by a rooted stance and a flexible torso, is an essential component of good balance.

The following exercise is the beginning version of Tai Chi Dragon exercises, suitable for all levels. In the photo above, Ted Box of Martha’s Vineyard Tai Chi beautifully demonstrates a more advanced version of Dragon Twisting.

Start with your feet a little wider than shoulder width, weight equally distributed on both feet. Feel that your stance is firm, and rooted into the ground.



Raise your right hand and point with one or two fingers at a spot on the wall (if inside) or an object or point on the visual horizon (if outside) that is the left corner of your visual field—that is, “Northwest” if you are facing north, or 10.30 if you are at the center of an imaginary clock face, facing 12. Your left hand rests at your hip, in a lightly closed fist.



Slowly, sweep your hand across the horizon from left to right, looking where your finger points and allowing your trunk to twist gently in the direction of your gaze. Keep your feet firmly planted and make sure the legs remain firm; the head and trunk twist, but the legs do not.



When your hand and gaze reach the right hand corner ("Northeast"), bring the hand in toward your body, closing the fingers into a light fist. Rest this hand on your hip and now extend the left hand to the right corner, pointing and gazing at the same point.



Pay attention to your legs, your stance, your balance, even as you are changing your gaze and your upper body position.

Slowly repeat the sweep, now going from right to left. Change hands, repeat once or twice more.



This is a complex exercise but once mastered, confers enormous benefits. Maintaining your balance as your eyes move is a critically important skill!



CLOSING: WU CHI



When you have finished your Tai Chi practice — whether just 3 minutes or an hour or more — it is essential to spend a few moments in the simple standing posture called Wu Chi. Wu Chi means “no form” or “no limit”, and it is the empty vessel into which we place the energy-processes and activations we have practiced, so they will “stick” in our nervous systems and become part of us. (One of my students calls this “saving to disk”.)

Simply stand with feet parallel, knees very slightly bent so you can maintain the feeling of root, arms down or held gently in front of your torso, or hands over the lower abdomen. Relax, with eyes closed or half-closed, and breathe.



Let your mind be empty of thoughts, but filled with awareness. Listen to the air around you. Just stand, just breathe. Spend a minute or so in this state, enjoying the stillness that contains all movement. And then you are done.

We hope you have enjoyed this introduction to The Tai Chi Way to Better Balance, and that you have already experienced some valuable results from the three exercises. Please share this free program with people who you think will benefit from it!

This is only a small sample of the complete Tai Chi Way to Better Balance training system, which includes more than 45 powerful, natural Exercises that distill the wisdom and power of Tai Chi into an accessible form, requiring no previous knowledge of the art. Divided into 5 Program Levels, the system includes practices that improve balance and stability in static positions, while moving the limbs, while walking in a variety of environments, and while carrying or moving objects.

These materials have been developed from many decades of research and experience, working with thousands of students of all ages and levels of physical ability.

The Complete Tai Chi for Better Balance System includes:

- 1.** The Tai Chi Way to Better Balance Guidebook (digital download).
- 2.** The Tai Chi Way to Better Balance DVD featuring 3 distinct, progressively challenging follow-along practice routines.
- 3.** The Complete Tai Chi Way to Better Balance 4 DVD Set, which includes the basic Balance DVD described above plus: Tai Chi Balance Training With Equipment, and Two-Person Tai Chi Balance Training, and The Art of Falling.

To learn more about available programs, visit: DanKleiman.com/Better-Balance

