

Walking Between Worlds: An Ancient Rhythm for Modern Health

By Robert William Melia

I've spent sixty years studying movement. I've cycled since I was four, trained in the deliberate power of Chinese martial arts, and rowed over eight million meters on a machine that goes nowhere. Through it all, I've been searching for a truth that feels sustainable—a way of moving that builds vitality without burning it away.

I found it in a deceptively simple protocol called Japanese Interval Walking Training (JIWT). But what surprised me wasn't the science; it was the echo of familiarity in its rhythm. I'd encountered this before, not in a modern lab, but in the ancient texts and traditions that I've long admired.

JIWT Protocols

Developed by Professor Hiroshi Nose and his team at Shinshu University, JIWT is straightforward: three minutes of brisk walking (aiming for a “somewhat hard” 6–7 on a perceived exertion scale), followed by three minutes of slow, recovery walking (a gentle 2–3). Repeated five times.

The data is compelling. A long-term study published in the *Journal of Applied Physiology* found this alternating pattern was significantly more effective than steady-paced walking at improving aerobic capacity, blood pressure, and insulin sensitivity in older adults (Nishizawa et al., 2015).

But the benefits run deeper than performance metrics. For an aging population, this isn't just about fitness; it's about independence. Research from the same team showed that JIWT can lead to a dramatic reduction in key risk factors for lifestyle-related diseases like hypertension and type 2 diabetes (Nose et al., 2009).

This is where a simple personal practice transforms into a broader vision for public health. The economic burden of managing chronic age-related disease is staggering, costing healthcare systems billions. A protocol like JIWT—free, scalable, and proven effective— isn't just medicine; it's preventative economics.

Yet, as my heart rate rose and fell in this measured cadence during my own practice, I recognized something deeper than lactate thresholds and potential public savings. The rhythm felt primal. I was practicing a modern, quantified expression of a principle that a 7th-century Daoist healer named Sun Simiao would have known by heart. Japanese Interval Walking Training (JIWT) offers a unique framework to integrate modern cardiovascular conditioning with traditional internal practices. By maintaining nasal breathing and mindful attention during fast intervals, the practitioner cultivates both physical fitness and internal energy regulation (Qi). This dual-purpose approach aligns with Daoist principles, emphasizing Xīn Hé Yī (Mind and Body Unity), self-regulation through RPE, and sustainable daily practice. Thus, JIWT becomes not just a form of interval training but also a vehicle for internal cultivation, bridging contemporary research and ancient health wisdom.

King of Medicine's Timeless Prescription

Sun Simiao (581–682 CE), revered in China as the “King of Medicine,” dedicated his life to *yang sheng* (養生)—the art of nourishing life. His masterwork, *Prescriptions Worth a Thousand Gold*, is a cornerstone of Chinese medicine, but its wisdom extends far beyond herbs.

His most famous advice is a proverb many Asians still quote today: “After eating, walk one hundred steps and you will live to ninety-nine.” This isn’t just a digestive aid; it’s a metaphor for the cumulative power of gentle, daily movement. But Sun Simiao went further, providing the crucial caveat that modern fitness often ignores: balance.

“In movement, the qi is stirred; in stillness, the qi is stored. To move without rest leads to exhaustion; to rest without movement leads to stagnation.” (*Qianjin Yaofang*, 27.4)

It’s a perfect, thousand-year-old summary of interval training. His instruction to move until the breath is engaged—but not exhausted—and then to rest until calm, is the soul of JIWT. The Daoist framework of yin and yang provides the metaphor: exertion (yang) must always be followed by recovery (yin) to maintain health and harmony. JIWT provides the stopwatch.

The Meditative Step: Buddhism's Moving Stillness

This rhythm of effort and ease wasn’t confined to Daoist thought. Buddhism, too, preserved it within its contemplative practices. In Zen monasteries, the practice of *kinhin* (經行)—walking meditation—serves as a deliberate counterpoint to the profound stillness of seated *zazen*. Practitioners walk in mindful awareness with each step, cultivating a deep connection between motion and calm (Sharf, 2014).

I see this same pattern in the great walking pilgrimages, like Japan’s 88-temple Shikoku circuit. The journey historically wasn’t a marathon; it was a natural interval training. Pilgrims would walk for hours—a sustained *yang* exertion—before pausing at a shrine or tea house for prayer and refreshment—a necessary *yin* recovery. The rhythm was both physical and spiritual, a perfect echo of Sun Simiao’s principle.

The Laboratory's Rediscovery

I have no reason to believe Professor Nose and his team were thinking of Sun Simiao or Zen monks when they designed their trials. Theirs was a mission of modern physiology: to find a safe, effective, and scalable exercise program for an aging population.

Their 2009 work, published in the *European Journal of Applied Physiology*, framed its findings in the clean language of science: this interval method improved aerobic capacity and metabolic health by optimally challenging the body's systems without overwhelming them (Nose et al., 2009).

Yet, in doing so, they used the scientific method to rediscover a wisdom the body has always known. They found the precise timing that allows the body to “stir” its energy without triggering exhaustion, and to “store” it without falling into stagnation. The modern explanation provides the data, but the lived, bodily experience is identical.

Closing the Circle: My Practice Now

For me, this convergence transforms a workout into something richer. When I practice JIWT now, I'm not just executing a protocol. I'm participating in a lineage. The three-minute buzz of my watch signaling a change of pace doesn't feel like a command from a robot; it feels like a gentle bell in a Zen temple or a natural impulse to pause and appreciate the view on a mountain path.

I understand the physiology—the lactate clearing during the slow phase, the heart strengthening during the fast. But I also feel the philosophy. It is a moving meditation on balance. It is the embodied wisdom of *yang* and *yin*. As biofeedback I use nasal breathing as an indicator of RPE 6-6.5, if I start to mouth breathe then I am overexerting this aligns with “stir the Qi”.

Japanese Interval Walking Training is a powerful tool for health, backed by impeccable science. But its greater gift may be its ability to close a circle. It proves that the most advanced science often simply rediscovers the deepest wisdom. It reminds us that the path to longevity isn't found in relentless effort, but in the timeless, essential rhythm of walking between worlds.

References

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About the Author

Robert William Melia is a lifelong student of movement and wellness traditions. Now 64, his writing explores the intersection of sustainable practice and longevity, informed by decades of experience in martial arts, rowing, and a relentless curiosity for what makes us well.