

Wudang

Twin Cities T'ai Chi

A MONTHLY E-NEWSLETTER

3/21



From Sifu Paul

Greetings, everyone,

On March 10, I had my first outdoor T'ai Chi practice; it felt good to be out in the sunlight doing the form and uplifting to think about the practices to come as warmer weather and greater light emerge. Spring is here, and the unseasonably warm March weather has me hoping the lion doesn't roar too loudly on the way out this month.

It's been a year since the pandemic brought the world as we knew it to a halt, including at our studio. A virtual world unfolded in its place that brought us greater connectivity and access to almost anything online; an increase in isolation and stress arose as well. Finding balance with T'ai Chi and Qigong can be integral to staying healthy in this time of transition. Join us on Zoom or live in the studio for classes.

In this issue, my teacher Grandmaster Wai-lun Choi turns 82 this month. He is an important figure in the world of Chinese martial arts as someone who has mastered four internal systems of martial arts and is a lineage holder in one of them. He has brought traditional lineage-based martial arts into the modern world by teaching them openly and examining and testing them through the lens of science. He's had a profound influence on my practice, teaching, and life. Master Choi has taught many workshops at our studio, and we dedicate this issue of *Wudang* to him. Happy birthday, Master Choi!

Lucky Charm

On March 17, St. Patrick's Day, my new grandson, Arthur Lawrence, was born — all 9.6 pounds of him. Welcome to the world, Arthur. —Paul



Seeking Submissions

If you have an idea for an article you would like to submit for the *Wudang*, please contact Paul at the studio or send us an email with your proposal or submission. We'd love to hear from you.

A Short Biography of Grandmaster Choi

Wai-lun Choi was born on March 29, 1939, in the city of Toishan, Guangdong province, in Southern China. Choi began his martial arts training at the age of 16, studying the external long fist style of Tibetan Lama with his first teacher, Chan Kueng-ng. In the early days of his martial arts training, he also practiced Thai boxing and judo for a brief period. He then studied a Northern Shaolin-based style, Mai Jung Lo Hon, with Master Poon Mao-yung. He also studied the healing arts of herbal medicine and bone setting from Master Poon and received a certification from the Chiropractic Academy of Hong Kong.

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Happy 82nd birthday,
Grandmaster Wai-lun
Choi!

Choi began to see the limitations in his external-style training and began to look for something deeper and more complete. He had heard about the grandmaster Chan Yik-yan, who had mastered several internal styles and was the ninth-generation lineage holder in the Liu Ho Pa Fa Ch'uan style. Master Chan was a successful businessman and didn't rely on martial arts to make a living.

When he was approached by Choi for instruction, Grandmaster Chan denied that he knew anything about martial arts. Choi knew otherwise, and he continued to make inquiries and requests for instruction. Master Chan opened the door of opportunity a crack by telling Choi he could take him out to dinner and talk about things, with one stipulation: he could not mention martial arts during the course of the evening. Chan wanted to see what else the young man knew about and was interested in, as well as taking the opportunity to judge his character. This testing period and the weekly dinners continued for one year before he was invited and allowed to officially begin studying martial arts with Grandmaster Chan.

Grandmaster Chan's residence was far away, and Choi took an hour bus ride and a 30-minute ferry boat to get there. He was allowed to attend three classes a week; each class was two hours long. Chan would demonstrate a movement only three times, and Choi was expected to repeat the movement and then practice it until he could perform it correctly for the grandmaster.

During the boat and bus ride after each class, Choi spent the time reviewing what he had learned by practicing the movements on a small scale in his seat so he could remember what he had been taught. This honed Choi's observational skills, his muscle memory, and his ability to analyze and understand the movements quickly. He also developed the discipline of concentration and practice, as the training was not free and was difficult to afford on a modest salary.

Over time, Wai-lun Choi learned and mas-



tered the complete Liu Ho Pa Fa Ch'uan system, Hsing-I Ch'uan, Pa Kua Chang, and T'ai Chi Ch'uan. Choi became a trusted inner-door disciple and performed many personal duties for Grandmaster Chan. Choi developed his skills to the level that he could teach. He was given permission to teach and began teaching junior students for Grandmas-

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ter Chan and at the Institute of Physical Culture in Hong Kong until he finally opened his own martial arts studio in Hong Kong.

Choi had many bouts with classmates, rival schools, and Hong Kong-style rooftop brawls that honed his fighting skills. In 1971, Grandmaster Chan asked Choi to participate in the Southeast Asian hand-to-hand martial arts tournament that was to be held in Singapore. Choi would be part of the Hong Kong delegation representing Grandmaster Chan. He had only two months to prepare and train. Choi won the eight-day tournament, where he earned the nickname Cannon Fist by defeating the reigning champion, Wang Chai Leung.

Wai-lun Choi moved to the United States in 1972 and settled in the city of Chicago. He opened a school in Chicago's Chinatown. Opening a martial arts school in Chinatown required more than the rent. Choi held a demonstration celebrating the opening of his school at the Chinese Community Center, where he was challenged by more than thirty Chinese "spectators" throughout the event



who were there to test his skill. All were vanquished in short order by Choi, and his school was established and accepted by the community and the various associations within Chinatown. Many of the challengers became his students.

Over time, Master Choi moved his school from its location in Chinatown to West Irving

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Master Choi with Grandmaster Chan Yik-yan and his wife after Choi's victory in Singapore.



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A sign in the window of Master Choi's Chicago studio reads, "Externally Emphasize Physical Fitness. Internally Strive For Humanity."

Park Road in North Chicago. This afforded him more space and accessibility to the larger community. A sign in the window of his school, visible from the street, read: “To develop yourself, you must turn away from mysticism and mythology and the belief in secrets that you imagine will transform you. Science and nature are your true teachers and correct training is the only way.” Choi’s reputation and teaching became well-known, and he attracted students from North America, Europe, and Asia.

After living and teaching in Chicago for seven years, Choi received a parcel in the mail containing a calligraphy from Grandmaster Chan stating that Chan was designating him as his successor, the tenth-generation grandmaster and lineage holder of the Liu Ho Pa Fa Ch’uan system — a fitting acknowledgment of Choi’s dedication, understanding, and mastery of the style.

Following this great honor, Grandmaster Chan was to visit Choi in Chicago to do research into some of the deeper theories and practices of Liu Ho Pa Fa. Tragically, Chan Yik-yan was struck and killed by a city bus on the congested streets of Hong Kong, and that meeting never took place.

Grandmaster Choi taught internal martial arts for forty years before “closing his hands” and his school in 2005. In that time, he taught hundreds of students the internal arts of Liu Ho Pa Fa, Hsing-I, Pa-Kua, and T’ai Chi; Qigong and meditation; and the external arts of Lama and Northern Shaolin. He was a generous teacher who taught authentic martial arts; he didn’t reserve “secret knowledge” for a select few. He would often say, “I’m not worried that you will steal my knowledge. I’m worried that you won’t understand my knowledge.”

Ultimately, he taught people how to develop their minds in order to think and analyze the practices they were learning and not just mindlessly copy them; he taught the relationship between the external and internal development of the body-mind and how to create harmony between them. Another sign

in his school’s window stated his philosophy succinctly: Wai-lun Choi’s Chinese Martial Arts: Externally Emphasize Physical Fitness. Internally Strive For Humanity.



Master Choi would often say that there is just one style of martial arts: Human Style. Understanding the physics and physiology of movement is essential to any and all practices. The following is an article illuminating the essential elements in Liu Ho Pa Fa but applicable to T’ai Chi and other styles as well. —Paul

Key Points in the Practice of Liu Ho Pa Fa

By Grandmaster Wai-lun Choi

The important thing, in my view, is to grasp the experience of the old masters so as to understand what lies behind the development of a successful and reliable training method. It is vital to reveal this, above all, to those who are new to the art, in order that they may avoid the pitfalls of practicing incorrectly. It is something that goes to the core of what is essential in martial arts development. I have a

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Master Choi’s 65th birthday celebration in Des Moines, Iowa



great deal of hands-on experience in Liu Ho Pa Fa, as well as the other internal arts, plus 32 years of practice and contemplation that I would like to share with those who are interested. It is only through careful analysis and sharing that these arts will survive as more than an empty shell.

A martial art is like any other. It is a part of human activity; it pertains to the study of bio mechanics and the relation of forces to the structure of the body. It is necessary to employ scientific ideas if we expect to study and teach it effectively. Because it belongs to science rather than opinion or belief, you must submit your practices to the test of proof. You must demonstrate the validity of your claims. For a good idea of the congruence between the thousand-year-old Chinese approach and current scientific research, see for example Philip J. Rasch, *Kinesiology and Applied Anatomy*.

However, a martial art adds another dimension and brings into play something deeper than the physical aspect alone. Liu Ho Pa Fa not only rests on a foundation of biology, physiology and anatomy, but also the spirit enables its proper performance. Its theory, from every perspective, complies with what is practical and scientifically sound. To develop

you must turn away from mysticism and mythology and the belief in secrets that you imagine will transform you. Science and nature are your true teachers; correct training is what will transform you.

Practicing martial arts involves not only factors concerning oneself — physiology, anatomy, psychology and so on — it also requires at least a basic awareness of the principles of physics and the related concepts of leverage, coiling, turning, slanting, triangulation, friction, balance of power, and opposition of forces. If you follow a training program based on such considerations, then your heart will improve. You must keep your feet on the ground. By adhering to the instruction of scientific theory, with constant practice and proceeding step-by-step, you will move to the next level. What follows is intended to add detail to this overview.

1. **Why the need for proof in learning martial arts?**

With proof your understanding will be clear. Only then can you see through the haze of myths and secrecy that stand in the way of progress. For example, the relation of gravity, air pressure, leverage, physics and so on to the nervous system, circulatory and respiratory functions.

*“Don’t theorize more
than you practice.”
—Wai-lun Choi*

2. **Relation of internal and external in Liu Ho Pa Fa**

The full name of the style is Hsing-I Liu Ho Pa Fa Ch’uan. “Hsing” represents the outside of things, their form. “I” means the inside, the idea behind the form. The creator of the style saw how animals fight for survival. You know the form their actions took and grasped the idea behind these actions. What this teaches us is how the spirit and body use the chi and the

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Master Choi demonstrates a Lama Strike on a well-worn heavy bag at his school.

mind. It shows us how we can use our limbs, bone, muscle, to bend and stretch, and how these affect the Chi circulation and enable us to improve the body. It relates the Chi and the spirit.

You move the way you do because your mind tells you to do something. How the body moves is controlled by the mind. In any situation, first you see, hear, feel. That has to do with the spirit. Spirit is the number one signal. It says danger, perhaps, watch out.



Mind is the number two signal: it tells you how to do what you do. Where the mind goes, the energy goes too, and then the whole body follows. When the body follows, it is very natural. From this we can see that any movement truly comes from the mind. The mind controls the whole system. The implications of this are considerable. Fake and real, stillness and motion are not separate and have the same root. They all stem from the working of the mind.

3. **Relation between practice and physiology**
The relationship between these two is

necessarily close. If you practice wrong, you will harm the body; when executing techniques, you must be in conformance with physical laws. Each time you move you must search for harmony, for then your breathing will be smooth and regular. The mind must go with the technique. It is important not to focus on power; you must relax the body. If you do this, the circulation is helped. This cannot be overstressed. The blood is vital. The blood is like a transportation system carrying nutrition and oxygen to make the body strong.

4. **Relation of the breathing system to tensing and relaxing**

Whether moving or still, relaxation is crucial. You need to relax the whole body in order to breathe normally. Only then can your circulation be good. If you are nervous, or if you force the power, you will tense your muscles, especially around the chest, and the breathing will be unnatural.

5. **Relation between movement and breathing**

When you are practicing, every movement must have harmony. The reason is because there are three parts to the whole body: the body proper, the hands, the feet. Suppose if you punched the hands went first, then the feet, then the body followed. This would violate what the Classics say: one thing moves, everything moves. But why do they say that?

The reason is because it has a direct connection to breathing. One technique done incorrectly, as above, will require three breaths and make the breathing fast. This is why the old masters insisted if one thing moves, everything must move. The correct way is body-hand-foot together. In other words, one breath, inhale or exhale, one energy. If you don't follow the Classics there will be no oxygen and thus no energy. Try an experiment. First punch to experience how you breathe; then move your foot after that and you will see for yourself what the old masters found. I have no doubt it took much time and much real,

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Master Choi during
a 2009 visit to the
Twin Cities

even painful experience to come up with this one-thing-moves-all things-move theory; and I deeply admire their analytical intelligence.

6. Relation of physics to bones in joint function

The old masters created techniques, all of which follow physics and physiology. Therefore, when practicing pay attention in every technique that the shoulder and elbow are down, the chest rounded and so on. Every movement must follow correct principles in order to have a complete and effective technique. The bones allow us to use leverage; the joints may be compared to a switch that enables us to change the angle and thus the leverage.

7. The relation of leverage to correct practice

Optimal performance comes from observing correct principles. In sparring, for instance, you must always pay attention to leverage. Only then can you reach a natural, relaxed state, save energy and save power. As the T'ai Chi Classis say, use 4 ounces to defeat 1,000 pounds. Or take the case of Japanese Judo. In both instances what is involved is leverage. In a real-world situation, everyone's body type is different. But if you follow leverage theory, the weak can defeat the strong, the small can overcome the large.

8. Relation of physiology to performance

Cultivation of a strong, tough mind can change the state of a person. If the body is not healthy, you cannot have a good psychological state, to say nothing of high aspirations. And even if you do have good ideas, if you lack energy, you will not be able to carry them out. Let some external factor get in your way and you will lose your confidence and be unable to move forward. The person who does martial arts, though, not only should have a healthy body, he should have confidence in his daily affairs. Present-

ed with difficulties, he can use his energy and strength of mind to deal with the problem. He will have the courage to face it. If your art is at a high-level, you necessarily have energy and courage; with courage your skill automatically is at a higher level. This higher-level skill that appears alongside courage is not only in regard to the body. More important is how it cultivates the spirit. The martial arts use psychology from beginning to end in their training. You must concentrate your spirit in your daily practice. If you do, you will not have any fear. If you have no fear, in a fighting situation your mind will be very strong. It is something that shows up in daily practice: in concentration, in the absence of fear, and the readiness to act.

These are three essential qualities.

Many years ago, on television I saw an American Olympic high jumper. Before he jumped, he concentrated his spirit, judging how

many steps he would need before he made his jump. He used his mind in order to succeed. When you do that, you enter the psychological state that is necessary for achieving success.

The proper state not only allows you to have confidence physically, but when you have difficulties or must confront an opponent, you will always maintain a clear mind and believe that you can win. In such a state, you'll be able to react immediately and easily.

9. Relation of mind to nervous system function

Any exercise is controlled by the nervous system. Proper neural functioning is what allows the muscle to stretch and contract. The bones have to do with leverage; the joints enable us to change leverage, as noted, while the muscles produce movement and delivery of power. It is how all activity shows up in the body. From this we can clearly see the critical role the nervous system plays in controlling bodily

*“One hour of instruction requires
100 hours of practice.”
—Wai-lun Choi*

activity. But the nervous system, from beginning to end, is influenced by the spirit and the mind. The mind is the ruler of the power.

Why do the Classics insist on that? If you talk about Hsing-I, that is form-idea, you are emphasizing mind. Liu Ho Pa Fa uses mind in the name to point to its cruciality. In martial arts the mind is of central importance. A skilled painter, for example, must have a detailed image in his mind in order to be able to transfer it to paper. It is the same in martial arts. If you separate the mind from the power, then you are unable to bring it to bear.

The whole art presupposes a very high level of unification of the spirit and the body. If you don't have the body to show the form, the mind is only an image, an idea. If you don't have the mind, you have a blind form. You cannot have one without the other. No real fighter would dare to use form alone, or merely imaginary power, against the muscle and bone and sinew of an actual flesh-and-blood adversary.

Many years ago, Master Choi gave me the following list of his standards to become an Instructor of T'ai Chi Ch'uan at his school. It has been a guide for my own practice ever since; I share them now. Whether one is interested in teaching or not, they are invaluable guideposts to progress in one's practice. —Paul

Standards for the Practice of Chinese Internal Martial Arts

T'ai Chi Ch'uan:

Instructor B, Level One: T'ai Chi Ch'uan

At this level, the principles of the Classics must be understood as the foundation of the form, that is, as a method for coordination of the hand, body, leg and eye, and for use of the proper footwork, stance, and division of body weight.

The sequence (form) must be performed with freedom, undistracted by any undue focus, strain, or tension. All movement must be stable, relaxed, and harmonious.



Instructor A, Level Two: T'ai Chi Ch'uan

At this level, the rhythm of the movement must be under control, and movement must combine soft with hard, yin with yang.

The mind must be able to control the body through the use of visualization: for example, the mind moves the body as if "swimming in the air."

The upper and lower body must be connected in motion so as to achieve a greater degree of harmony, smoothness, and flexibility.

Senior Instructor, Level Three: T'ai Chi Ch'uan

At this level, the foundation laid in the previous two levels is used to mobilize internal power with the mind, without using muscle power. The breathing must be coordinated with the technique — in and out, hard and soft are opposite but not separated. In other words, the form is done showing the total integration of inner (breathing) and outer (body motion).

A high level of sensitivity in motion must be demonstrated — the body is light and sensitive, soft and flexible, but at the same time, there is great stability, a sinking of the Chi to achieve rootedness.

In practice the spirit is used to direct the mind to utilize the Chi to create power. At this level, one pays more attention to the use of mind in the mobilization of power.