



Wudang

A MONTHLY E-NEWSLETTER

4/20



From Sifu Paul

This year, the groundhog failed to see a shadow; curiously, the vernal equinox had its earliest arrival in more than a century on Thursday, March 19. Later that day, I closed our studio to help with containment efforts of the COVID-19 virus and reduce the chances of exposure both for our members and for the larger community.

We live in a time of accelerating change; the coronavirus is the latest significant disruption that has made us examine our personal and social preparedness and tested our local, national, and world health and economic systems. It is also testing the internal readiness of our body-mind and spirit. It has both unified us mentally and emotionally and separated us physically.

It has been scientifically established that feelings of isolation and social disconnection create high risk factors for a compromised immune system, make us susceptible to illness, and diminish our overall health. In order to maintain our health and vitality, maintaining our social connections in whatever form we can is more important than ever to offset our physical separation; quieting the mind and connecting to nature are necessary to maintain a high-functioning immune system and maintain a balanced perspective. I, for one, am grateful it's springtime and I can almost smell my lilacs.

I would like to acknowledge all the healthcare workers around the world treating and caring for those who are sick. May they stay healthy in their time of service.

In this issue, we look at how T'ai Chi principles and practice can be guides to remaining calm and finding balance at a time of uncer-



tainty. We also introduce our online training videos and ways to practice with them, discuss the shelter-in-place directive and our second-quarter needs, and more.

T'ai Chi Principles and Practice Beyond the Form

The practice of T'ai Chi adheres to a set of principles that governs our movement, energy, mental clarity, and focus and promotes a calm awareness that is often referred to as moving meditation. In examining the subtle gradation between precaution, caution, and fear, it would be useful to examine the core principles of T'ai Chi as a guide in choosing a response to COVID-19 and the official and unofficial messaging it brings with it. The following are five core principles of T'ai Chi that are essential to the art and its practice.

Balance

Better balance in T'ai Chi can certainly refer to the ability to stand on one leg or simply feel more stable in daily activities, especially as we age. Yet the essence of T'ai Chi is balancing the ever-changing complimentary forces of yin and yang through the unpolarized energy that they flow out of and return to. In T'ai Chi, maintaining this neutral energy is called central equilibrium. It is essential to maintain this neutral center as we interact with the constant flow of positive and negative forces manifesting externally and internally. Balancing the internal helps balance the external, and of course, the reverse is true. T'ai Chi as a martial art may deal with an incoming force or threat by yielding (yin) or counterattacking (yang) but will always hold a stable center.

“When there is no more separation between ‘this’ and ‘that,’ it is called the still-point of the Tao. At the still point in the center of the circle one can see the infinite in all things.”

~Chuang-tsu

T.T. Liang often said the mental aspects of T'ai Chi were more difficult to master than the physical aspects. Nonetheless, it is necessary to balance and harmonize our perceptions and beliefs around any situation in life. Belief is the interpretation of our perceptions. When people have different beliefs, they have different perceptions of the world. A thought that we hold to be true will translate into a biological response.

The primary impulse in all living things is survival. Because of this fact, the human body has evolved sophisticated defense mechanisms to ward off threats from the outside world as well as threats from inside us. To help us evaluate our perceptions of the environment, we possess within us something called the HPA axis. These letters stand for hypothalamus, pituitary, and adrenal.



The hypothalamus is a portion of the brain that, among other functions, interprets our perceptions of the outside world and translates them into one of two actions: growth or protection. The hypothalamus then sends the information to the pituitary gland. The pituitary gland, known as the master gland, sends signals to 50 trillion cells at any given time to coordinate their behavior. If a threat is perceived and the hypothalamus calls for protection, the pituitary gland will forward the signal to the adrenal glands, which will send stress hormones into the bloodstream and on into cells. Once activated, the stress hormones will initiate the fight, flight, or freeze response.

If the body is in a fight, flight, or freeze state, blood is sent to the arms and legs to fortify an external protection system. Where was the blood before it went to the extremities? It was in the viscera—the gut. Nourishing the viscera provides the growth and maintenance of the body. This is what happens when the signal for growth is received by the hypothalamus. Stress hormones constrict the blood

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vessels, blood flow is restricted to the viscera, and growth is inhibited. Stress hormones not only draw energy away from the viscera, they also shut off the immune system. The body knows the immune system uses a lot of energy to carry out its protective functions, so if the body is saving energy for an external threat, the immune system will be shut off. This is why surgeons introduce stress hormones during transplant surgery—so the body can't fight off the foreign organ tissue.



The immune system and the adrenal system are both protection systems in the body. The adrenaline system protects us from threats outside our body, and the immune system protects us from threats inside our body such as bacteria, viruses, parasites, and other pathogens that can infect humans. The fact is that we are carrying these pathogens in our bodies most of the time no matter how good we feel. It's the immune system that keeps these invasive organisms under control by restricting their growth.

The HPA axis is an effective and efficient system of protection in the body. The stress response should only be used for short periods, yet we find ourselves in an almost constant state of stress. It's not our body's

protective mechanism that is at fault but our perception of the environment. If we want to control our internal biology, we have to recognize the power of our perceptions in forming our health and the quality of our life experiences. Knowing how to shift into a state of mind that promotes optimum performance of the body's biological functions is necessary if we are to offset the day-to-day stress of modern life.

Wait a minute. Isn't the COVID-19 virus a real threat that's killing thousands of people worldwide?

Yes, it is.

Then shouldn't I check the news 15 times a day, tally body counts, and estimate when I might contract the virus?

No. This activity is completely out of balance and will predictably and consistently diminish the efficiency of your immune system.

Should I then force myself to adopt a positive attitude about things to change my perceptions?

No. It's more important to have a quiet mind than a positive mind. Trying to be positive when you're stressed or feeling unsafe often creates more stress. Most of what happens in the mind is not under our conscious control, and it's better that way. The sheer volume of bodily functions controlled automatically by the unconscious mind would run much less efficiently if we had to consciously direct them—assuming we could even do this; fortunately we can't.

The mystics and masters of meditation brought the mind into quiet and peaceful states by bringing attention and intention to singular states of awareness such as the breath, positive emotions like love and compassion, or simply emptiness. Integrating the body and mind through calming movements as in Qigong and T'ai Chi will signal the hypothalamus to return us to a state of growth and homeostasis.

Relaxation

Relaxation is the prime directive in the practice of T'ai Chi and is why modern medicine now recommends T'ai Chi for conditions such as high blood pressure, anxiety, and stress. The

word “relax” is an approximate translation of the Chinese word *sung*, which means to loosen, release, let go of, retaining only that which is essential; reduce to the essence. The movements of T'ai Chi are learned and practiced then refined using *sung* to a level of minimal effort that deepens the breath called sinking the Qi to the *tan tien* (abdomen) and directing the movements using the mind.

T.T. Liang states, “All of the postures must be practiced without the slightest constraint of energy and without any irrelevant tensions. Only then will the legs, arms, and trunk be weightless and nimble; only then will the body feel lively, alert, smooth, and free. . . . If you want your Chi to circulate freely through the whole body without hindrance, your postures must be even, effortless, harmonious, and comfortable. Then your hands, legs, and body will follow the dictates of the mind.”

Let the Solo Form be a refuge of relaxation for the body and mind. This can only be done through practice and *sung*, letting go within and without.

Rooting and Flexibility

The natural byproduct of *sung* is a feeling of sinking through the feet and connecting deeply with the ground you stand on; this sensation is called rooting. Rooting provides a firm foundation and an anchored stability that allows the movements in the upper body to feel light, agile, and flexible.

This flexibility and yielding to force while remaining rooted and connected to the earth are utilized in the practice of Push Hands, in

A Special Birthday

On March 29, our teacher Grandmaster Wai-lun Choi turned 82. Congratulations, Master Choi; with gratitude, we wish for you many more.

which two people connect and engage in an exercise of trying to uproot each other using Push and other T'ai Chi techniques. The partner on the receiving side remains relaxed and flexible in the upper body in order to redirect incoming forces while maintaining their balance through the root.

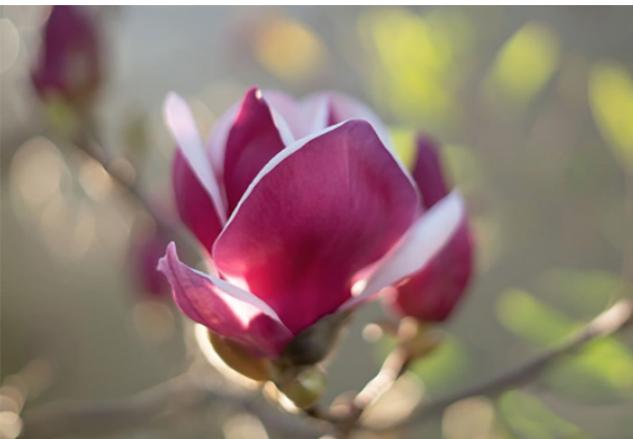
A common analogy used in T'ai Chi is that of a willow tree with its flexible boughs bending in the wind while its roots hold firmly and deeply in the ground. The fact is that all trees, in order to withstand storms, must be flexible and bend in the wind with roots held in the earth. This bending is what helps form the heartwood, the mechanically strong, decay-resistant central core of the tree. Trees need this stressor to become strong; they also grow together in forests to mitigate the effects of the weather and help protect each other.

What in your life is your anchor, your unshakable root? Are you flexible in managing stressors that can be used to strengthen your center, or do they topple you over?

Stimulating the Qi

The T'ai Chi classics say, “The Qi should be stimulated and the spirit of vitality should be retained internally.” In China, the word “Qi” has many applications; the most common written form of the word depicts steam rising from a pot of cooking rice and is recognized as meaning “air, breath energy, life force.”

When slow, deep, and full breaths are taken while performing slow, rhythmic movements with a focused attention, the Qi becomes stimulated. In Western terminology, there is an increase in blood oxygen saturation and diffusion to the cells in the body. This is often felt as warmth, tingling, vibration, pulsing,



and other sensations in the hands, arms, spine, and other parts of the body, and it can be directed by the mind. T'ai Chi has been shown to have positive effects on the immune system, hypoxia (oxygen deficiency), blood pressure and associated diseases, asthma and other respiratory disorders, and metabolic and circulatory conditions, with new research and studies being done continually. Given the fact that T'ai Chi and Qigong are enjoyable to practice, stimulating the Qi is pleasurable medicine. T.T. Liang used to say, "Every day, I take a 30-minute trip to paradise."

Rhythm and Harmony

Each of the postures in the Solo Form has an inherent rhythm and flow, as does the form in its entirety, depending on the pace one performs it at. When the movements of the waist, legs, arms, and torso are synchronized, they are in harmony; this creates Tien Gan—whole-body power.

Creating rhythm in your practice is to find a consistent time and place to practice. As humans, we are part of nature, and nature is the mother of rhythms and cycles—we cannot live in harmony without them. Within nature, there are creation cycles and destruction cycles; as naturalist and explorer John Muir put it, "Nature is ever at work building and pulling down, creating and destroying, keeping everything whirling and flowing allowing no rest but in rhythmical motion, chasing everything in endless song out of one beautiful form into another."

Nature has disrupted our lives and our rhythms. It's up to us to restore them one heartbeat at a time. Find a little time and a little space, and a little practice will emerge for you again. Let the words of a poet be your guide.

*"Let yourself be silently drawn by the
strange pull of what you really love.*

It will not lead you astray."

~Rumi



New Online Practice Videos and Training Guide

After closing the studio to live classes on March 19, Todd Nesser and I got busy and produced eight training videos for members to practice along with at home. They provide a range of practice options for beginners and advanced practitioners alike, and they're all under 30 minutes in length.

You can find them on the studio website, tctaichi.org, under the Members menu.

The following is a short guide to the videos and some ways they might best be used for your home practice.
~Paul

The 6 Healing Sounds Qigong: 24 minutes total (with introduction), 14 minutes practice (without introduction)

An easy-to-learn and follow ancient Qigong practice that uses movement, sound, and visualization to balance the emotions and strengthen the immune system. Regular practice of this set yields deep feelings of

protection and contentment and awakens an awareness and appreciation of our internal organs.

Grasp the Bird's Tail in Four Directions: 23 minutes total video time

If you have just begun the practice of T'ai Chi, you would have learned the fundamental postures of Beginning, Ward Off, Roll Back, Press, and Push. When performed together in sequence, they are known as Grasp the Bird's Tail. They are among the most potent postures for stimulating the Qi. Included in this video:

1. Spine and leg warm-up: 7 minutes
2. Gathering Heaven and Earth Qigong: 3 minutes
3. T'ai Chi Balancing Cycle: 7 minutes
4. Grasp the Bird's Tail in Four Directions: 6 minutes

Stretching, Qigong, and T'ai Chi: 16 minutes total time

1. Stretching: opens the neck, shoulders, spine, and waist: 7 minutes
2. Qigong: Crane Breathing and Energy Spheres: 3 minutes
3. Five Elements T'ai Chi Form: 6 minutes

The Five Elements Form is a simple, easy-to-follow T'ai Chi Form developed by Sifu Paul for hospital providers with no prior experience in T'ai Chi. This Form takes the practitioner through a full sequence of Five Stimulations or actions that exercise the body and stimulate Qi flow. The Five Stimulations are: 1. Rise and Sink, 2. Full and Empty, 3. Expand and Contract, 4. Turn and Twist, 5. Fast and Slow.

Solo Form First Section: 9 minutes total time

1. Introduction: 2 minutes
2. First Section with Empty Step Drill: 4 minutes
3. First Section Complete: 3 minutes

A short and developmental practice for



beginner and advanced practitioner alike. Do the empty-step practice to develop leg strength, rooting, and empty steps, then follow with the full first section and feel the difference in stability and ease in your footwork.

T'ai Chi Warm-Ups: 28 minutes total time

This is the complete Solo Form Warm-Up that precedes each Solo Form class. Too much sitting in a confined space? In less than 30 minutes, become your vibrant, vibrating self again.

1. Warm-Ups: 21 minutes
2. Bone Beating: 3 minutes
3. Shake the Tree: 4 minutes

Yang-Style T'ai Chi Solo Form: Sections 1 and 2: 9 minutes

Section 1 of the Solo Form is foundational and stimulates the Qi to begin circulating. The second section is dynamic, pairing repetition in yin sequences (Repulse Monkey, Cloud Hands) against contrasting yang sequences—balancing postures (kick section) to mobilize the Qi throughout the body.

Yang-Style T'ai Chi Solo Form: Sections 1 and 3: 11 minutes

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A cup of tea will relax the body and warm the heart.

Isabelle enjoys her fancy tea set and loves it when someone cuts her pancakes.

The Making of the T'ai Chi Practice Videos

Todd Nesser has shared his talent as a graphic designer with the studio for years, creating our branding, website, posters, and signage, to name just a few things. When asked to help create the practice videos, he didn't hesitate in agreeing to do so.

Without prior experience in film or video, Todd set up lighting and sound tests, troubleshooted technical problems—especially with sound and wireless mics—researched and rented equipment, learned an editing program, then edited the footage, added titles and music, and painstakingly cleaned up the soundtrack, which was packed with backing up beeping Bobcats from the construction site across the street, noisy neighbors cutting Sheetrock, and ambient noise from who-knows-where picked up by the wireless microphone. The shelter-at-home directive was imminent, so there was a short window of time to get it right and get it done. The resulting videos speak for themselves.

Thanks Todd, we wouldn't have them without you.

This is the ultimate medium-length Solo Form. Section 1 of the Solo Form is foundational and stimulates the Qi to begin circulating. Section 3 is a perfectly balanced composite of sections 1, 2, and 3, giving the practitioner a wide range of posture types to develop breadth and depth in developing their T'ai Chi body.

Yang-Style T'ai Chi Solo Long Form: 17 minutes

There is a reason the old masters of T'ai Chi created long forms in the early eras: It was to keep the mind-body unified and the mind-intent focused on your movements for longer periods of time to develop concentration. Lose your concentration in combat? Big problem. This is the ultimate T'ai Chi experience that can be practiced from 15 to 30 minutes, depending on your pace, to integrate mind, body, and spirit. So go ahead, take a trip to paradise for as long as you want.

"We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are."

~ Anaïs Nin

Twin Cities T'ai Chi and the Shelter-in-Place Directive

Wednesday, April 1, is April Fool's Day, but it's no joke that Minnesota's governor issued an executive order keeping citizens in their homes from March 27 through April 10 with limited exceptions. It's fair to say these dates should be regarded as flexible based on the ever-changing patterns of the COVID-19 virus. The studio has complied with the regulation and has ceased offering classes until further notice.

April 1 is also the start of the second quarter, a time when members of the studio renew their memberships, continue their training, and help keep the studio in business. These are trying and challenging times for all of us, as each of us struggles with our own unique set of circumstances that apply pressure to our vulnerabilities and demand we stay grounded, creative, and flexible. For some, that's not so easily accomplished, and it's more difficult to do alone. The studio has always fostered a sense of community, not just in a shared interest in T'ai Chi but also in each other.

Since we moved into our current space in 1993, there have been three other occasions in that span of time when difficult circumstances

have threatened to close the studio. In each instance, the membership has rallied and pulled us through. Our current modest tuition rates just about cover our monthly expenses, which continue even when the studio is closed. Our successful fundraisers have left us on a fiscal foundation that can get us through a short period of less-than-full monthly expenses paid. Over the long term, however, that shortfall is unsustainable.

It's been heartwarming to have received Q2 dues from a few members even before the start of the quarter. If you are able to pay your second-quarter dues, we would be grateful; it will help minimize a shortfall this quarter. If you cannot, it's understandable in this environment. If you are inspired to give beyond the tuition fees, know that your contributions are tax deductible and deeply appreciated.

We will be back in the studio as soon as we are able; likely that will be some time this

quarter. Our online practice videos are more than a stopgap; they begin a new era in interactive learning. Please come back, one and all, when the time comes, whether you paid dues or not. We value your presence and membership in our community.

Thank you all, be well, and navigate safely through this challenging time.

*“Between stimulus and response, there
is a space.*

*In that space lies our freedom
and our power to choose our response.*

*In our response lies our growth and
our happiness.”*

~ Viktor Frankl

Heaven Lake Stream,
Chaingbai Mountain,
China

