



Wudang

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A MONTHLY E-NEWSLETTER

From Sifu Paul

Greetings, everyone,

The solar New Year has arrived, and the lunar Chinese New Year arrives on February 12. This is the year of the Golden Ox. Aligned with the earth element, the Ox is stable and grounded, loyal, trustworthy, and nourishing. I, for one, am ready for more of that.

With the continued support of members, this month, we held our first live class in the studio since March of 2020. We are now doing two live classes a week on Saturdays and Wednesdays and simulcasting them on Zoom. I am planning on shooting more videos this winter to make available to members, gradually expanding our class options, and scheduling at least one class in the park this coming spring. Is it too early to think about spring? I don't think so.

Last but not least, a heartfelt **Happy 121st Birthday to Master T.T. Liang**, born Jan. 23, 1900. It was you who gave us the gift.

Stay warm and safe; regular T'ai Chi and Qigong practice goes a long way to that end. Happy New Year.

The Eight Active Ingredients of T'ai Chi

Excerpted from an article by Peter M. Wayne, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Director of Research, Osler Center for Integrative Medicine.

As science continues to amass studies and data on the health benefits of T'ai Chi practice, the findings, when published in journals and health magazines, often end up looking like excerpts from the T'ai Chi Classics. ~Paul



When Peter Wayne, medical editor of Introduction to Tai Chi from Harvard Medical School, began conducting scientific studies on the health benefits of tai chi, he began noticing that tai chi works in a variety of ways, not just one. Whereas most drugs have a single active ingredient, he observed that tai chi was more like a multidrug combination that uses different components to produce a variety of effects.

Wayne formulated the idea of the “eight active ingredients” of tai chi, which he and his colleagues now use as a conceptual framework to help evaluate the clinical benefits of tai chi, explore the underlying mechanisms that produce these effects, and shape the way tai chi is taught to participants in clinical trials (and to teachers). While different styles of tai chi emphasize different ingredients, these therapeutic factors are interwoven and synergistic.

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In-studio classes resuming slowly, simulcast on Zoom.

Happy 121st birthday, Master Liang!

The eight active ingredients of Tai Chi

1. **Awareness.** This ingredient is essential in order to fully develop all the others. It begins as self-awareness. Paying attention to your breathing and the sensations in your body as you practice the slow, graceful movements of tai chi helps you become more focused. It counteracts what Asian meditative traditions call “monkey mind,” the distracted thinking that focuses on



external, past, or future events and commonly dwells on negative thoughts and what-ifs. This mental chatter often intrudes when you're trying to do seated meditation. But in tai chi, as you concentrate on shifting your weight, moving your hands and arms, or turning your body, your mind is less likely to wander to tonight's dinner or an argument with your partner, and you are more likely to be present in the moment. Cultivating this skill during the practice of tai chi helps you to be more focused throughout your day, even when you're not doing tai chi. And there are other advantages as well. A heightened body awareness may contribute to better balance. And having a clearer mind may help you to more calmly navigate challenges such as a high-pressure work deadline or an emotional teenager.

2. **Intention.** Through visualization, imagery, and other cognitive tools used in tai chi, you alter your intentions, beliefs, and expectations. This has real-world effects.

For example, instructions in tai chi such as “stand rooted like a tree” can simultaneously affect your muscle tension, postural alignment, and mental state, resulting in enhanced balance. Research on stroke patients has demonstrated that motor imagery—for instance, visualizing movements in paralyzed arms without actually moving—can help some people recover motor function. Similar mental training has also been used in athletes and musicians to improve their performance. This power of imagination and belief is behind the placebo effect as well. All of these examples are evidence that the power of suggestion can have a physical impact—or, as tai chi masters say, “Imagination becomes reality.” [This is a quote from T.T. Liang. ~Paul] In an exercise like “Washing yourself with healing energy from nature,” when you picture yourself bathing every cell in your body with healing energy, it just may help you to feel better and be healthier.

3. **Structural integration.** Tai chi looks at the body as an interconnected system, not as a collection of individual parts. As a result, when practicing tai chi, you won't do one exercise for your biceps and another for your glutes. Instead, tai chi integrates the upper body with the lower body, the right side with the left side, and the extremities with the core. Alignment and posture are part of this structural integration, and tai chi trains you to find alignments that are safe and unstrained, allowing you to perform graceful movements. You move more efficiently—not just during your tai chi practice, but throughout your day. The result is less stress and load on your joints and better balance. Similarly, improved posture has benefits that

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Master Liang quoted by
Harvard scientist

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extend well beyond your tai chi class. When you walk or sit with your shoulders rounded and your torso hunched over, it is hard to take deep breaths. But when you straighten your back, roll your shoulders back and down, and open your chest, you breathe more deeply and efficiently. Not only does this integration improve your ability to move without pain, but it also affects your mental health. In two different studies, people who sat or walked more upright during the experiments had a more positive outlook afterward than those who slouched while sitting or walking.

4. **Active relaxation.** When you hear the word relaxation, you may think of chilling out by the pool or flopping on the couch in front of the TV. In tai chi, relaxation is an active concept, not a passive one; it has to be, since you're doing tai chi while standing. Muscles that are actively relaxed have a greater range of motion and can move more efficiently. What's more, tai chi promotes "intelligent strength," using all parts of the body efficiently and in a connected way so no part is overloaded. The circular, flowing motions of tai chi are also meditative, helping to shift your mind and body into a deeper level of relaxation. Tai chi is a balance of moderate effort with active relaxation—like yin and yang.

5. **Gradual strengthening.** But many people also suffer injuries, especially when they try

to push themselves too far, too fast. Tai chi provides a gradual approach to building strength, increasing flexibility, and even improving cardio fitness. It's about moderation and minimizing the risk of injury. Instead of hoisting heavy weights, you'll build strength through slow movements,



slightly flexed stances, shifting your weight from leg to leg, and swinging and lifting your arms. Slow, continuous, relaxed movements that you repeat provide dynamic stretching to increase your range of motion and flexibility. And despite its deceptively mellow look, tai chi is a low- to moderate-intensity aerobic activity, depending upon your fitness level and how you practice it. (Deconditioned individuals will get more of a cardio workout than someone who exercises regularly.) In addition, moving more quickly from one position to the next, sinking deeper into postures, and doing tai chi for longer periods of time can increase intensity up to the level of a moderate walk, according to studies. Because tai chi appears to affect your cardiovascular system in more ways than just aerobic training, even healthy individuals may be able to improve their heart health.

6. **Natural, freer breathing.** You can survive days without eating, maybe even a few without drinking, but mere minutes

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Moderate, consistent practice proves key to injury-free exercise.



without breathing. Tai chi corrects the slumped, rounded posture that you often resort to after too many hours at the computer, behind the steering wheel, or in front of the TV. As soon as you stand or sit taller and open up your posture, breathing becomes easier, and you're able to take in more air (see "Basic tai chi breathing"). The deeper you breathe, the more oxygen your body takes in, improving performance. Your breath also has a direct physiological effect on your nervous system. Deep, slow, and rhythmic breathing activates your parasympathetic nervous system, which promotes a more balanced, relaxed state. Your heart rate slows, and hormones that promote feelings of calm and social bonding increase. The opposite happens with fast, superficial patterns of breathing. Deep breathing also, in the parlance of Eastern philosophy, helps to "massage" your internal organs. Researchers in Japan placed pressure sensors into participants' colons. The sensors, which behaved like little floating buoys, detected pressure waves that corresponded to all types of breaths, both normal and deep. Other research has shown that these breathing-induced pressure changes and rhythms can increase blood flow to organs and may help to alleviate musculoskeletal pain, including back pain. The effects are greater with deeper breaths.

7. **Social support.** Most people practice tai chi in a class setting, which affords them the opportunity to interact with the instructor and with others in the class, creating a community. This sense of belonging can be a strong motivator to stick with your practice. Plus, the social support you receive from this type of group has been shown in research to have beneficial effects on your health. People who have strong ties to others tend to be healthier and happier, and when they do become sick, they tend to recover more quickly. Even if you practice on your own, think of yourself as part of the larger community of tai chi practitioners.



8. **Embodied spirituality.** Tai chi, with its influence from Taoism, creates a framework for integrating body, mind, and spirit for a more holistic life. When you practice tai chi, you are doing more than just physical exercise. Your psychological well-being, your social interactions, and your larger beliefs about nature are all affected. You become more aware, more sensitive, more balanced. And the experiences you have while doing tai chi begin to spill into your everyday life. For example, after a tai chi session, you may eat more slowly and mindfully. You may drive less aggressively. You may respond to a stressful interaction with a screaming child or a rude salesperson more calmly. Tai chi's philosophy can affect your behavior in a good way. You learn to "go with the flow," a tenet of Taoism. This adaptability or resilience enables you to better manage stress and bounce back from adversity or trauma. It's like an emotional form of self-defense.

Creating a T'ai Chi Practice at Home

If you want better results, then forget about setting goals. Focus on your system instead. You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems. If you want to run a marathon, you must first become a runner.

~James Clear

A new year is upon us, and resolutions and commitments for renewal well up inside us,

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"When you practice tai chi, you are doing more than just physical exercise. Your psychological well-being, your social interactions, and your larger beliefs about nature are all affected."

especially in the area of our bodies. Desires to move more, eat better, eat less, and shed some weight are common goals. With more time being spent at home, it's important to find ways to move.

Being in the familiar environment of home offers tempting distractions, and producing the discipline and focus to sustain a home practice can be difficult. A successful strategy to overcome this is to take elements from the studio T'ai Chi class and practice them in short, easy-to-do sets throughout the day. Even at work, a 5-minute break of stretching, balancing, form work, or Qigong has a quick rejuvenating effect that has lasting results if done consistently over time.

The following are some short practices taken from the three parts of the studio class: stretching, Qigong, and Solo Form. They can be used as is or as part of a longer practice.

Stretching warm-ups: Perform each for 1 minute for a total of 5 minutes.

- 2 arms coiling forward with breathing
- Spinal cord breathing
- Spinal wave
- Spinal twist
- Willow Tree Bends in the Wind (both directions)

Balance warm-ups: Perform each for 1 minute for a total of 4 minutes.

- Golden Rooster Stands on One Leg
- Sweep With the Knee
- Bend the Bow Shoot the Tiger
- Separate the Foot

Qigong practice: Practice numbers 1, 2, or 3 as a single practice for 5 minutes, or 1, 2, and 3 together as a set for 1 minute each, or 4 as its own set for 5 minutes.

- Ocean Breathing
- Gathering Heaven and Earth
- Deep Earth Pulsing

- T'ai Chi Qigong sequence: Crane Breathing, Energy Spheres: rise/sink; side to side; expand/contract; White Crane Spreads Its Wings

T'ai Chi Solo Form

- Grasp the Sparrow's Tail in Four Directions (right side only, or right and left sides)
- T'ai Chi 5 Elements Form: (1) Beginning; (2) Cloud Hands; (3) Diagonal Flying; (4) Golden Rooster; (5) Push (with Qi ball); Repeat Beginning Posture to close the form.
- First Section only; Second Section only; Third Section only.
- The whole form.

It takes 15 to 20 minutes to perform the Long Form. We often take more time deciding what to have for dinner. The above list features short practices that take around 3, 5, 10, or 20 minutes to do. Taking these short movement and energy breaks throughout the day will perfect the practices and make them easy to do—and just might get you in the mood for a longer practice at home.

These are just a few possibilities. Be creative and flexible and design your own practices and you'll be inspired and motivated to elevate your mood and season your day with energizing movement.

*“Power without love is reckless and abusive,
and love without power is sentimental and anemic.*

Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”

~ Martin Luther King Jr.

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To create an “anytime, anywhere” practice, combine warm-ups and form elements.