



Wudang

TEACHING THE ART, SCIENCE, AND SPIRIT OF T'AI CHI



02/22



From Sifu Paul

Greetings, everyone,

Happy Spring. It's been a typical Minnesota slow roll into warmer weather, but things are starting to rise and shine. Here comes the sun. My grandson Arthur had his first birthday on St. Patrick's day and got nearly as much birthday cake in him as he got on him. On March 29, my teacher, Wai-lun Choi, had his 83RD birthday. Grandmaster Choi is doing well and enjoying his retirement at his home outside of Chicago.



More notable anniversaries in April: On April 10, I celebrated my 40TH anniversary of meeting and studying with T.T. Liang. Deep bows to both Masters Liang and Choi for all of their generous teaching; they have truly changed and enhanced my life and the lives of so many others.



April 30 marks the 23RD anniversary of World T'ai Chi and Qigong Day, an event that has expanded to include more than 80 nations and hundreds of cities throughout the world. With a simple premise to practice T'ai Chi or Qigong at 10:00 AM in one's local time zone on the last Saturday in April, thousands of people will pause and unite to engage in a practice of relaxed movement, inner peace, and self-cultivation.



A new weapons class will begin in May. I will begin teaching the T'ai Chi Broadsword/Saber (Dao). If you have finished the Solo Form, you may join the beginning class on Thursday evening at 7:30. The Monday weapons class at 7:30 will do a weapons review and feature the Broadsword/Saber. If you already know the form, come and learn refinements, applications, the left side, and the short Dao fencing form.

T'ai Chi in the Park will begin Wednesday evenings on May 18, weather permitting.

- There will be a "practice and corrections" hour at 5:00 PM if you haven't completed the Solo Form and want some corrections and new movements or if you know the form and want some solo or partner practice.
- The regular Solo Form class will begin at 6:00, with a weapons practice to follow.
- The Wednesday night Zoom class will be off for the summer.

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Happy 1st birthday to Sifu's grandson Arthur.

Happy 83rd birthday to Grandmaster Wai-lun Choi.

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T'ai Chi in the Park resumes May 18!

Weekly on Wednesdays

Hampden Park
993 Hampden Ave. W.
St. Paul, MN, 55114

Travels With T'ai Chi: Celebrating 40 Years of Practice

I began studying T'ai Chi Ch'uan with T.T. Liang in 1982. Ronald Reagan was president, the median income was \$20,171, and a gallon of gas was \$1.30. I had a weekly lesson with Master Liang on Saturday mornings and completed his T'ai Chi Ch'uan system in 1989. After 40 years of practice, I realize, as long as you continue to practice, there is no completion; the art continues to evolve and reveal new insights and paths of self-discovery.

I wrote this article in the mid-1990s, describing a typical class with him. I offer it again to commemorate my own journey with T'ai Chi and to remember a unique, complex, and important person in my life.
— Paul

Journey to St. Cloud

Saturdays started early. On the road by 8:30, my classmate and I headed northwest about 75 miles outside the Twin Cities to St. Cloud, Minnesota. We drove through pine dotted farmland passing the exits to a half dozen small towns along the way including Monticello where the nuclear power plant was. When we passed that exit, we knew we were getting close. Driving into St. Cloud, we passed the car dealers and chain stores that were crowding out the small shops that once gave the community a small-town feel. As we approached the one-story mustard colored house where master Liang lived my thoughts always turned to the class that lay ahead.

After knocking firmly on the side door, Master Liang would appear and gesture us to come inside. As we stepped into a small entryway that separated the kitchen straight ahead and a doorway to our left that led to the basement, the smell of cooked vegetables mixed with a hint of incense and liniment permeated the air.

Once inside Master Liang would smile, greet us, and offer an observation. Typically, this observation was limited to the obvious — “Oh, it is quite cold today.” or “Oh, just you come today” if my classmate was absent. But it foreshadowed the keen eye that would



scrutinize and monitor us in the class that followed. For me, Master Liang's two defining characteristics were a disarming sense of humor and an ability to know people on a level that went well below the surface simply by observing them. All this while they were unaware they were being observed.

After our greetings, Master Liang would send us down the stairs that led to the basement while he returned to the kitchen to clean up after his breakfast. This was the start of a weekly ritual, which for me began in April of 1982 and would continue through January of 1989. As we headed down the stairs, we could see the rust orange carpet that covered the basement floor. The walls were covered with pinewood paneling. The

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All articles and other content written by Paul Abdella unless otherwise noted.

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**Master T.T. Liang
(1900–2002)**

**Sifu Paul journeyed to
St. Cloud, MN, for
weekly lessons with
Master Liang from
1982 to 1989.**

paneling also extended down two square-shaped floor-to-ceiling pillars.

The pillars were spaced equally down the center of the room creating three rectangular practice spaces. The first space you entered as you came down the stairs was the one Master Liang would sit and view the class from. The student in this space would get the most corrections since they were most visible to Liang. For this reason, my classmates and I would take turns each week in the front practice space. The second space wasn't bad really. It was about the same size as the first and only slightly obscured from Liang's view by the student in front.

The third space we affectionately called the hole. Not because it was smaller and darker, and it most assuredly was that, but because the white cork covered ceiling dropped down over a foot to accommodate some ductwork

beneath the surface. This created a space that was not only cramped, but also occasionally dangerous. While doing a form that contained a jump it was quite possible to hit your head on the ceiling, and weapons forms required humorous mutations on their intended choreography. Fortunately, Master Liang couldn't easily see those who were stuck in the hole, and in my nearly seven years of commuting to St. Cloud, only about three of those years required its use.

The two pillars, which divided the room, were branded with deep gashes from anyone trying to master a weapons form, and the cork ceiling held an array of puncture wounds, which bled a fine white dust whenever you grazed it with your weapon. On such occasions the guilty party would stop and look apologetically at Liang to which he would reply "never mind!" as if to say you aren't the first one and you won't be the last. Along the far wall were two full size mattresses stood on end for use in push hands

practice. Next to them a long row of wooden swords, broadswords, canes and staffs leaned, one after the other, against the wall. Nearly every week someone would ritually replace a weapon after doing a form in a slightly askew position causing it to fall over, taking the whole row down like long wooden dominoes. In the early days Master Liang would dryly reply to the sweeping crash with an "O.K., pick up." Later on, you were more likely to hear "banana head!" Then you knew he was starting to like you.

We usually had ten to fifteen minutes from the time we first entered the room to the time we heard Master Liang's slow steady descent

down the basement stairs. This time would be used for some quick stretching and to review whatever form we happen to be working on. Soon Master Liang would come down, settle into his chair and announce "O.K. one round to the music!" We took our positions in

our respective practice space then the student in front would start the music.

In the early days of St. Cloud, Master Liang would lead us in his five warm-up exercises before we did the form. These consisted of simple movements of the neck, arms and torso followed by two simple qigong exercises. I was always struck by the short powerful waist turns that would propel his arms, free of all tension, into effortless, graceful patterns around his body. I would try and copy the look of his movements and would feel my arms begin to relax in the attempt.

Master Liang wasn't a tall man; he stood maybe 5'5" or 5'6". His rounded shoulders supported a round bald head with a wreath of fine white hair, which wrapped behind and along the sides, framing a face which bore an uncanny resemblance to Yoda of Star Wars. When he smiled, which was often, you immediately noticed that all but two of his front teeth were missing. The two teeth on

*"For those who expect everything,
there are many curses.
For those who appreciate everything,
there are many blessings."
— James Clear*

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"I was always struck by the short powerful waist turns that would propel his arms, free of all tension, into effortless, graceful patterns around his body."

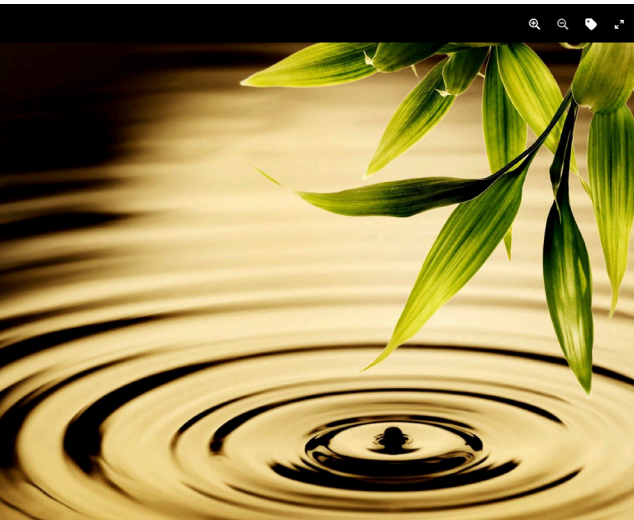
the bottom row were spaced apart displaying an animated red tongue when he spoke or laughed. He had deep-set eyes with a spirited sparkle in them that seemed to look through you.

His torso was short and thick with a protruding belly he affectionately called his ocean of chi. At first this handle seemed an old man's idle joke until he allowed us to push and strike at his belly. Using the technique of receiving energy we were repelled backward with a jolt. This torso, however, made his legs and arms seem thin by comparison.

He usually wore a sweatshirt of some kind and dark sweatpants with black canvas deck shoes. As the years went by, his attire became even more casual, consisting of flannel pajamas with the pant bottoms tucked into his socks, mimicking his elastic sweatpants.

As the music began to play Master Liang would sit in his chair attentively watching our form movements. By the time we reached the first Repulse Monkey posture his eyes would begin to lower and his head began to droop. By the time we reached Needle at Sea Bottom he was usually asleep. At first, we were surprised, then amused and finally relieved that our form wasn't under such close scrutiny. He would remain asleep for most of the rest of the form, occasionally stirring to bark out a count "3...4...da!" if our forms were out of sync with the music.

Master Liang knew every note of every measure in the music and where every count of a posture corresponded to it. If your form were off the beat he would wake and count aloud until you corrected it. How he managed



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to wake up just as you screwed up was almost as surprising as the corrections he made to the entire form after we finished — even the sections he seemed to be sleeping through. We never really agreed on how he did it, but the corrections were detailed and complete.

In general, form corrections from Master Liang were clear and direct. He would begin with a semi-encouraging statement such as "pretty good, but not quite up to standard." The highest compliment you could receive was that something was up to standard. By this he meant it was performed according to the principles of the T'ai Chi Classics — the Bible for T'ai Chi Ch'uan practice.

Next on his list of priorities was the music or the beat. "The beat is not quite correct. You must learn to do it to the music — to make it more aesthetic and more scientific!" Master Liang believed his unique contribution to the art of T'ai Chi was the introduction of music in practice. He believed that in addition to its health, martial, and philosophical aspects, T'ai Chi when practiced at its highest level was also moving meditation. In meditation, the integration of posture, breath, and a tranquil

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mind are essential. To that end, the music, or more specifically the rhythm or beat of the music, was used as a tool to guide the body and hold the mind to a single focus, thus creating a meditative state.

Nothing garnered him more criticism from his contemporaries and their students than the use of music. For the most part, they didn't understand his four-part method of using music to: 1. Learn the movements by counting, much like you would in learning a musical instrument. 2. Use the counts to follow the music and focus the mind. 3. Introduce breathing patterns or rhythms as a substitute for the music. 4. Discard all tools (music, breath patterns etc.) and just do the form as meditation. If they did understand this, they deemed it unnecessary.

Indeed, Master Liang himself has said in his article "Why should we practice T'ai Chi to music?" "Of course, if one can reach the highest level while practicing T'ai Chi without music, so much the better. But I cannot do it because I am a human being, an ordinary, ignorant person with a heart like a monkey and a mind like a horse. So I must use music as a means of concentration, as a stepping stone to the highest level of T'ai Chi."

Often Master Liang would get up and demonstrate not only how to do a posture correctly but how one of us was doing it incorrectly. This could be both humorous and painful. "Who is this?" he would say, making a face and sticking his rear end out in the posture Single Whip. "Is that me, sir?" I might volunteer. "Yes! You stick your bloody, silly ass out like Shao-lin. This is not T'ai Chi's way!" He would then relentlessly mimic your posture week after week until you corrected the problem.

For some, this was not a constructive way to learn. For others, myself included, it forced you to surrender your sense of accomplishment. To realize that T'ai Chi was a never-ending work in progress, and that progress could always be made if you could set aside your ego and look honestly at yourself. This is not so easy to do. As Master Liang would often

say, "It's hard to see the dirt on the back of your own neck."

After the solo form and corrections Liang would announce "O.K., what's next? Knife! Cane! Sword?!" And so it went — moving through the repertoire of forms that comprised T.T. Liang's T'ai Chi art. In the end it was quite a repertoire indeed, with three solo sword forms, a double sword form, three sword fencing forms, one solo broadsword form, a double broadsword form, one broadsword fencing form, a cane form, solo spear drills, two-person spear sets, a two-person san shou form, push hands and ta lu. All these practices in addition to the Yang style long form. It was a sink or swim teaching strategy that forced you to practice just to keep up.



When review and corrections were complete, we went to work on whatever new form or practice we were currently engaged in learning. Master Liang would correct what we had already learned then teach us something new. This part could be somewhat challenging since Liang wasn't long on explanations. He would show us once and have us try, showing us again with some more instruction, then a third time before he returned to his chair and sat down. After practicing awhile, it was possible to coax another demonstration or two out of him but not without complaint: "You

bloody give me lot of trouble!” as he got up from his chair. Two-person forms allowed us to get hands on with Master Liang and really get his feel — especially empty-hand forms.

After this instruction period Liang would need to take a break. He would retire to a back room where a small altar stood which held some fruit and flowers, two photographs of his parents, and a small bronze Buddha. He would light some incense, say some prayers, emerge from the room, and walk up the stairs to begin cooking his lunch. We practiced awhile to insure we’d remember the new material then took a break ourselves.

Soon the scent of cooked vegetables began wafting downstairs. Boiled yams, carrots, lotus beans, Brussels sprouts, and always cabbage — cooked in a watery oxtail broth to a consistency only a man with no teeth could appreciate. When the smell of lunch came downstairs, we knew Master Liang would soon follow to finish up our last half hour of class.

Although many stories, jokes, principles and classics had been strewn throughout the previous hour and a half, the final thirty minutes was where we would try and coax T’ai Chi’s “secrets” from the master. Of course, Liang was never tricked by us into saying anything he hadn’t intended to say, and often what he volunteered amounted to nothing more than idle chatter. But those times when he sensed you had done the work, put in the time and were close to something, he would give you a gift that put your T’ai Chi in an entirely different place. Of course, he always let you know about it. “If I did not tell you this thing you would spend a whole lifetime and never get it.” He was probably right.

Typically though, the time was spent somewhere between chatter and profundity with deeper discussions of the classics, and more stories. He told stories of the old Masters, both his classmates and teachers, and those who came before them.

Most interesting of all, perhaps, were stories from his life. It was a life that began when the last emperor was still in power, and spanned

into the age of computers and space travel. A life that succumbed to excess and illness, then health and prosperity. As a high-ranking customs official Liang rubbed elbows with politicians, royalty, and criminals alike. He traveled the country, from the turbulent seaport of Shanghai to the frozen isolation of Outer Mongolia. He was imprisoned during the war and imprisoned by his vices, in time forgiving both his captors and himself. Liang landed in Taipei, where he learned from the cream of Chinese martial artists in an era of great masters. Finally, at the advice of a fortuneteller, he ended up half a world away, teaching T’ai Chi in America to a culture very different from his own.

I always valued my time with Master Liang, not because he was well known or he somehow fit the profile of an “old master” but because he presented himself as a fallible human being who shared the wisdom of his experience. It was the experience of a long and extraordinary life. Liang’s art was subtle and internal even if, at times, he was not. This allowed it to get inside, to germinate and grow, not revealing a full blossom for years. But most of all, at least for me, his was a life that showed by example that what you accomplish in life isn’t as important as what you overcome.

Master Liang went upstairs to eat his lunch. My classmate and I stayed behind to gather our things and write a few last notes. Once upstairs, Liang was already eating his vegetable stew, clearly more interested in his food than us; he barely looked up as we set a too-modest sum of money on the table for the day’s class. We said our good-byes. “Thank you very much, sir, take care, we’ll see you next week.”

Liang, looking up again, sipped some tea and nodded. “O.K., bye, bye.”

*“No winter lasts forever;
no spring skips its turn.”
— Hal Borland*

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“Most interesting of all, perhaps, were stories from his life. It was a life that began when the last emperor was still in power, and spanned into the age of computers and space travel.”

Metarobics: Healing the Body With T'ai Chi and Qigong

Science continues to reveal, in its own terms, the many health benefits of T'ai Chi and Qigong. Dr. Peter Gryffyn presents over ten years of research into how and why T'ai Chi benefits health from an evidence-based, medical perspective in his book *Mindful Exercise: Metarobics, Healing, and the Power of Tai Chi*. The following is a short excerpt from the book profiling how T'ai Chi is unique and differs from other forms of exercise.

Overtime, I came to realize that a large variety of chronic diseases shared a common element — an element directly affected by tai chi and similar exercises, which have unique and measurable effects on blood oxygen saturation and diffusion. It is worth noting that hypoxia (reduction of oxygen reaching various tissues or areas of the body) underlies the majority of chronic diseases plaguing society, including cancer, heart, lung, and kidney disease, stroke, and diabetes. Hypoxia is also implicated in asthma, chronic pain, and immune disorders.

My research and experiences consistently supported that many of the health benefits of tai chi and forms of qigong (breathing exercises) had to be the result of a physiological response related to enhanced blood oxygen saturation and diffusion, a mechanism that was distinctly different from aerobic and anaerobic forms of exercise in that it had direct and beneficial effects on hypoxia. By default, this meant that a third “new” category of exercise must exist. My research and observations pointed to a dynamic state of relaxation and enhanced respiration as underlying the primary mechanisms of action. This “third school of fitness,” which I called Metarobics, for reasons described below, is being developed out of the slow movements of tai chi, as well as forms of



yoga and qigong when focused on relaxation and the breath.

The theory of Metarobics is centered on the unique way the body responds in relationship to oxygen use during slow, relaxed movements. I use the word Metarobics for two primary reasons. The first is the blood oxygen measurements show that slow, relaxed movements, coupled with deep abdominal breathing, maximize blood oxygen saturation and diffusion to every cell of the body. With the root “meta” (meaning “above”), Metarobics thus becomes “above aerobics,” as an enhanced way of using oxygen in the body.

Neither strength training nor cardiovascular exercise in the traditional sense, Metarobics is a very different way of moving distinct from traditional exercise, perfecting the body in ways as novel as those in which aerobics differs from strength training. This is not to discount the benefits of aerobic exercise and strength

training, which are still necessary for a healthy life. But it may point to an additional medium of exercise that can enhance current activities and total health, or provide a form of exercise for those unable to participate in more vigorous activities.

“The mind (yi) controls the qi. Where the mind directs, the qi will follow. Therefore, if you use Yi power rather than Li power (muscular effort), the qi will flow freely.”
— Yang Cheng-Fu

The second reason Metarobics is a good term for these exercises relates to preliminary research that indicates that higher levels of blood oxygen saturation and diffusion enhance metabolic function, to optimize cellular functioning and health. In this case, the word “Metarobics” relates to enhanced oxygen-based metabolism. When you engage in aerobic or anaerobic exercise, the large muscle groups command the supply of oxygen in the body. This is considered the primary reason you get stomach cramps if you eat before intense exercise, as the blood is drawn from the organs and is redirected to the muscles. The effect of redirected blood flow is felt as cramps in the stomach, but also affects every organ in the body, including the brain. This is why it can be hard to think after intense exercise. This momentary redirection of blood flow is worth the long-term aerobic benefits, and further stresses the benefit of Metarobic exercise. It is worth noting that cancer is almost unknown in the oxygen rich environment of the large muscle groups.

Research indicates that the following two factors lie behind many if not most of the remarkable benefits of tai chi and similar exercises. Research supports that the following two factors may affect a wide variety of physiological responses in the body, including the production of proteins and amino acids involved in metabolic function:

1. Reduce muscle tension, combine with slow, full breaths, result in greater blood flow and oxygen distribution throughout the entire body including the organs, as opposed to more vigorous forms of exercise that result in blood flow being redirected to the large muscle groups.
2. Increased blood oxygen saturation, oxygen use, and diffusion resulting in, or are an

indication of, enhanced metabolic function, with a resultant increase in the disease fighting and healing abilities of the body.

Measurable differences indicate that if enhanced blood oxygen saturation, diffusion, and oxygen use are not direct causes of the many benefits attributed to these exercises, they are at least an indication that something unique is going on in the body — something different from a conventional exercise, which results in no change or even a drop in blood oxygen saturation, depending on intensity.



Spring Is Here

Thanks to all of you who have paid dues for the second quarter. Our membership dues are kept affordable to accommodate as many people as possible in learning T'ai Chi and Qigong. When members pay dues early in the quarter, it helps us meet our expenses with more ease.