

# CANVAS REBEL

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Performing the T'ai Chi Solo Form



Paul Abdella and one of his grandchildren



Paul Abdella and T.T. Liang, 1984

## Meet Paul Abdella

We were lucky to catch up with Paul Abdella recently and have shared our conversation below.

**Alright, Paul thanks for taking the time to share your stories and insights with us today. Can you recount a time when the advice you provided to a client was really spot on? (Please note this response is for education/entertainment purposes only and shouldn't be construed as advice for the reader)**

Six years ago, my business was disrupted. It fractured and divided when my former business partner and I split. It was a little like starting over. Not completely, as there were senior members who stayed on, but most of the board of directors had left, and there was much reorganizing and rebuilding to do. Some members stepped up and really pitched in to help get things up and running again, but my nature was to have a hand in everything and take on more than I was able to effectively manage. A friend and member of Twin Cities T'ai Chi had introduced me to the ideas of the entrepreneur and strategic coach Dan Sullivan. Dan points out that we all have areas of unique ability, areas of excellence, competence, and of incompetence. He poses the question: "What do you have to stop doing to become successful?" Take a look at what you procrastinate at. These are things you dislike doing and are probably incompetent or merely competent at. Finding someone who likes—and is good at—doing these >

**“What do you have to stop doing to become successful?”**

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things is imperative. He uses the phrase “who not how” to distill this idea. Don’t try and figure out how to get better at something you’re not very good at; find someone who loves to do these things.

**Letting go of things you’re good at in order to do the one thing you’re great at is difficult**

On one level, this is obvious. Where things get tricky is when you’re good at a few things and like doing them, but they’re not your area of unique ability. Letting go of things you’re good at in order to do the one thing you’re great at is difficult, but is often what prevents the good from becoming great. This is a work in progress for me, but it continues to free up time, energy, and creativity as I move through the process.

**Great, appreciate you sharing that with us. Before we ask you to share more of your insights, can you take a moment to introduce yourself and how you got to where you are today to our readers**

I was always physically active as a kid. I had a lot of energy—perhaps too much—so my father got me involved in sports. I sampled and enjoyed many of the most popular sports where we lived. My dad often watched sports on television, so it wasn’t unusual when I walked into the room one day, and he was watching a sport that I hadn’t seen before.

I sat down and watched it with him. I was captivated by this sport and one of the two participants. I asked my father what they were doing, and who was the man that was dancing around so much? He said it was boxing, and the man’s name was Muhammad Ali. I asked my dad if I could do that sport. He didn’t answer me. I knew that meant he would think about it.

A few weeks later, he said there was a judo class starting up at the YMCA downtown and that I could sign up for a 6-week class if I wanted to. I knew that meant that boxing was out, so I’d better take what he was offering me. I was 10 years old at the time.

**The judo class was vigorous and challenging but also fun.**

The judo class was vigorous and challenging but also fun. I stuck with it. In a few years, I also started wrestling.

After almost 7 years, both of my knees had fluid buildup in them and chronic pain. I left both sports and spent the next few years sampling and searching for another martial art to practice that had no grappling and kept me off my knees. Chinese kung fu had become popular and with it, its most visible star—Bruce Lee.

I found a local teacher and began learning a Southern Chinese kung fu style. I immersed myself in the practice, its philosophical underpinnings, and learning how to fight.

On one occasion, I saw my instructor practicing a form of movement that looked very different from the fast and intense movements of the kung fu I’d been learning. This was slow, meditative, and even dancelike. I thought it was beautiful. I asked what it was and if he would teach me some of it. He said it was T’ai Chi and that he was learning it from a teacher who was studying kung fu from him. He introduced me to his teacher, and I began to learn T’ai Chi. >

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Performing the T'ai Chi Sword Form



T.T. Liang

After two or three lessons, the teacher informed me that he was studying T'ai Chi with a well-known master who had recently moved to a town about 75 miles from where I lived in Minneapolis. He generously invited me to travel with him to meet the man and perhaps see if he would accept me as a student. We arrived early one Saturday morning, and I was introduced to Liang Tung-tsai, known in America as T.T. Liang.

T.T. Liang was born in 1900 in Northern China at the end of the Qing dynasty when the last Emperor was still in power. In his early 40s, he was stricken with a grave illness and wasn't expected to live. A family friend summoned Professor Cheng Man-ching, a well-known T'ai Chi master and doctor of Chinese medicine, to try and stabilize his condition.

Professor Cheng began treating his patient. Part of the treatment was to learn and practice T'ai Chi. At first, T.T. Liang was too weak to stand and practice T'ai Chi. Over time, though, he could perform the movements and devoted himself to the practice. He made a gradual but full recovery. He credited the medical skills of Professor Cheng and his practice of T'ai Chi for giving him a new lease on life.

T.T. Liang and his teacher came to the U.S. in 1963 to give the first official demonstrations of T'ai Chi Chuan at the United Nations. Professor Cheng stayed in New York, and Liang eventually went to Boston, where he taught T'ai Chi for many years until he decided to retire. He and his wife moved to Minnesota, where their daughter lived.

**He graciously  
accepted the gifts  
but not the giver**

I stood in the kitchen of his house after my introduction and handed him the wrapped incense and China black tea I had brought as a gift then nervously asked if I could study T'ai Chi with him. He graciously accepted the gifts but not the giver, stating that since I had no experience with T'ai Chi, he didn't think I could catch up to the group of mostly T'ai Chi teachers that were meeting in his basement. >

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My heart sank.

I reached into the bag I had brought the gifts in and pulled out a framed drawing I had done and presented it to him, hoping it would have been for my acceptance as his student, but now, I offered it as a gesture of respect. I thanked him for his time.

He took the drawing and studied it for what seemed like a long time then looked up to confirm that I had drawn it. I believe he saw the disappointment in my face but also my sincerity.

**“Okay, you stand in the back and try and follow along,”**

“Okay, you stand in the back and try and follow along,” were the words I heard next.

“Thank you, sir,” I muttered, then swiftly descended the stairs to join the others before he changed his mind.

I drove to his house every week and descended those stairs for almost 7 years and learned his complete T'ai Chi Chuan system. He authorized me to teach, and I had a relationship with him for 20 years. I gave a eulogy at his funeral. He was 102 years old when he died.

During my time studying with Master Liang, I would meet and practice with some of the other students in a small T'ai Chi school run by one of my classmates back in the city. In a few years, my friend moved to Taiwan, and a fellow student who had moved to Minnesota from Boston took over the school. Soon, the school moved into a larger space a few blocks away, and I started teaching there with him. That partnership lasted 23 years until I took over as chief instructor and executive director of Twin Cities T'ai Chi in 2016.

**“To teach is to learn twice.”**

There's a saying that goes: “To teach is to learn twice.” After more than 40 years of studying, practicing, and teaching T'ai Chi, I understand how to present it to a wide variety of students and accommodate their needs. I have taught T'ai Chi in hospitals to doctors, nurses, social workers, and patients alike. I've taught in corporate settings, at universities and colleges, and to individuals seeking to improve their health, to experience a moving meditative practice, or to learn the martial art aspects of T'ai Chi.

At Twin Cities T'ai Chi, we teach the art, science, and spirit of T'ai Chi to our members and broader community. The practice of T'ai Chi has four main components: (1) health, (2) self-defense, (3) mental development, and (4) meditation. People come to us with different needs and interests and don't always want to participate in all of those facets of the practice. My T'ai Chi lineage goes back 200 years; I can reach back into that lineage and draw from its deep well of knowledge. I've created innovative practices and training methods. I've infused them with what science has discovered and confirmed about health and wellness and adapted them to the needs of people living with the challenges of life in the 21st century. >



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Demonstrating a T'ai Chi kick



Leading a T'ai Chi class at Hamden Park

## We'd love to hear a story of resilience from your journey.

In 2016, I took over Twin Cities T'ai Chi as executive director and chief instructor. In 4 years, I had rebuilt the organization according to my vision of a school that offered complete training in T'ai Chi and related practices—not just the typical health club stuff—and made it available and appealing to adults of all ages. I had a lot of help. One of our members with corporate business and board experience stepped forward and helped me put a new board of directors together. She became president of the board and our business manager. I put together a great team of instructors, all of them with 15 to 20 years of experience practicing and teaching T'ai Chi. A member with high-level professional design skills worked with me to rebrand the business and give it a new look and created our website. There were so many more too numerous to mention. Soon, business was flowing again.

In January of 2020, we were off to a roaring start with our plans for the year ahead and great momentum from the previous year. Then I began hearing about a contagious virus that began in China and was starting to spread to other countries and continents. By March, the governor of Minnesota closed my business and all businesses like it due to the coronavirus.

**By March, the governor of Minnesota closed my business and all businesses like it due to the coronavirus.**

I quickly got together with our designer to film several different T'ai Chi practice videos that we posted on our website for members to practice along with in the absence of classes. When the weather warmed up in late April, I scheduled some classes in a nearby park. People were cautious at first about showing up but eventually came, masked and distanced, to learn and practice T'ai Chi and have some community with each other. >

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At the end of May, the George Floyd incident happened in Minneapolis, and rioting and civil unrest erupted throughout the Twin Cities. Practice was suspended briefly then cautiously reinstated.

During all of this, I had been working to get classes online but was having difficulty getting adequate sound through my computer and the wireless mic I was using. I'm not very tech savvy. In a classic "who not how" moment, I reached out to our designer, Todd, who found a Bluetooth in-ear mic that worked very well, and I was up and running, teaching classes again, virtually.

Fortunately, the weather was beautiful that spring, summer, and fall, so outdoor classes continued and were a joy to teach. In early autumn, I was able to schedule live classes again with limited class sizes. I outfitted our studio with large HEPA filtering units rated to filter viruses that did a complete air exchange in the space five times an hour. This was not a fail-safe corrective, but it did purify the air, and it made students more relaxed about being indoors together.

## **I simulcast all the classes on Zoom.**

I simulcast all the classes on Zoom. This was awkward at first since I was teaching to two groups at the same time and had to wear both a headworn wireless mic on one ear to be heard in the studio and an in-ear mic in the other ear to be heard on Zoom.

By January 2021, I opened up classes that require students to work with a partner in close proximity, touching each other, called Pushing-Hands practice. Slowly, we were moving toward some kind of normal, but with the awareness that things had changed and would not be exactly the same as before the pandemic.

An underlying principle of T'ai Chi is to flow and adapt to change in as relaxed a manner as possible. We learn this in the solo practices, test it in the partner practices, and seek to continually apply it in our daily lives. This is challenging, but it makes all of life a continuing T'ai Chi practice. The Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu summarized this well:

"One who lives in accordance with nature does not go against the way of things.

He moves in harmony with the present moment, always knowing the truth of just what to do."

## **What do you think helped you build your reputation within your market?**

Although T'ai Chi and the adjunct study of Qigong/Chi Kung have been practiced in the West for several decades now, there has been a surge in their popularity in recent years. Three diverse streams of information have increased T'ai Chi's exposure to the general public. The first is the growing body of scientific research and evidence demonstrating its efficacy in managing and improving certain aspects of health such as stress, blood pressure, respiration, balance, immunity, fatigue, and more. >

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Second, the internet has increased exposure for the practice of T'ai Chi in two other areas: the history and lineage of different styles of T'ai Chi with old and rare films of various masters being uploaded for all to see, showcasing the depth and diversity of their skills.

Third, there is also good content on the internet featuring T'ai Chi's martial arts tradition, allowing people to see differences in styles and quality of practitioners.

**I still experience  
great joy and  
discovery in the  
practice of T'ai Chi**

After more than four decades of study and practice, I still experience great joy and discovery in the practice of T'ai Chi and in teaching and sharing the art with others. All of our staff are long-time practitioners and are equally passionate about their practice and teaching.

People discover Twin Cities T'ai Chi and find we are grounded in the history and lineage of the art. We understand and can transmit the health, martial, and meditative aspects of the practice. We make the practice accessible and love sharing it with people of all ages. This gets you noticed and builds your reputation.

## **Contact Info:**

Website: [tctaichi.org](http://tctaichi.org)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/people/Twin-Cities-Tai-Chi-Chuan/100057567903437/>

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