



Wudang

8/19

A MONTHLY E-NEWSLETTER



From Sifu Paul

Welcome to August and the late-summer season, that smoldering gateway to autumn. In this issue: an opportunity to join our board of directors, information on vagal tone, an exciting new fall class schedule, and more. Enjoy the end of summer.

Seeking New Board Members

Twin Cities T'ai Chi is a nonprofit organization governed by an all-volunteer board of directors comprised of studio members and nonmembers who are passionate about T'ai Chi, our studio, and our mission: Twin Cities T'ai Chi is dedicated to teaching the art, science, and spirit of T'ai Chi and related practices to improve the quality of life for its members and community.

We are looking to elect a new board president and two additional members to the board by the end of September.

Board members serve a three-year term and attend board meetings, which are held 8 to 10 times a year on Saturday afternoons.

Our new board president will work closely with Chief Instructor/Executive Director Paul Abdella and other board members. It would be helpful if the candidate has been a board member before—ideally in a nonprofit or membership-based organization—or at least possesses a strong desire to serve and gain board experience; has demonstrated leadership skills; has run a successful business or at least has business skills and experience (for profit or nonprofit); has the ability to communicate, listen, and seek input from others; feels comfortable delegating; and can keep meetings running smoothly.



We are also looking to add two additional members to the board, one to replace an outgoing member and a second to expand the board. We are especially in need of people who have skills and experience in:

- Helping organizations grow membership
- Communications, marketing, and social media
- Nonprofit management
- Event planning
- Fundraising
- Volunteer coordination

Anyone with a strong interest is welcome to apply whether or not you have the skills listed above. Board members may be but do not have to be members of the studio.

If you are interested in serving on the board or in an advisory capacity or just want more

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Como Lake at sunset

information please contact Paul at the studio or send us an email. If you know anyone who might be interested, please let them know and have them contact Paul or email the studio. Any of the board members would be happy to explain more about what we hope to accomplish and what the positions might entail. This is an opportunity to help us grow and to give back to our studio, now 26 years strong.

China Dream Trip 2019: Tian Tan Park: A Brief Return

This column features stories and anecdotes from my recent trip to China. —Paul

Tian Tan Park is a 660-acre green space in Beijing. It was our first destination when arriving in China, which allowed us to stretch out after a long plane ride, practice Qigong, and shake off some of our jet lag. That day, we entered the park through the East Gate. A few days later, we returned to the park to again practice Qigong, this time entering through the South Gate.

In a city with 22 million people, a park of this size gets used. There was ample activity on the east side, but South Gate is where the



action is. Urban parks in the U.S. contain playground equipment for kids; Tian Tan Park contains playground equipment for adults. Lots of it. After entering through the gate, a short walk through rows of well-groomed trees lands you in a maze of colorful exercise equipment that at first glance looks like a children's playground. Although anyone can use the equipment, and many children do along side their parents, it's mainly adults that come for a daily workout. I slowed down a little as we passed by to watch the action but knew we would be back that way after our practice, so I kept moving to our destination.

A winding path through open grassy areas and groves of trees, punctuated by flat practice spaces of concrete pavers or brick, led us to a favorite area where we intended to do our practice. That day, the park was full of people playing music, singing, practicing martial arts and Qigong, dancing, or just moving through the park with family and friends on their way to somewhere else. Our intended practice space was occupied, so we went looking for

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Chinese parks are exercise "playgrounds" for adults as well as for children.

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Pagoda in Jade Spring Temple

Contact Us

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another and settled on a spot near a group of older adults who were having a dance class. It was some form of ballroom dance, and their music was loud and distracting.

We began with a simple practice that everybody knew called Deep Earth Pulsing. It's a very grounding practice that helped me tune out the dance group and their music. Today we were going to learn a complex Nei Gong practice called Big Dipper Star Stepping, which came from an ancient female Daoist lineage. A practitioner steps a footwork pattern of the Big Dipper constellation and adds changing cycles of hand movements that represent each of the seven stars of the Dipper and stimulate energy centers in the body. If that isn't complicated enough, there are vocal toning patterns that go along with the movements.

Getting started on this was rough for most people, and it was hard to hear the explanations of the movements over the dance music. But eventually our noisy neighbors packed up and left, and our group started to get the hang of the sequence. It can be done as a solo practice or in groups of four like a cosmic square dance, which was how we practiced it. This added another dimension to the practice: coordinating with other people.

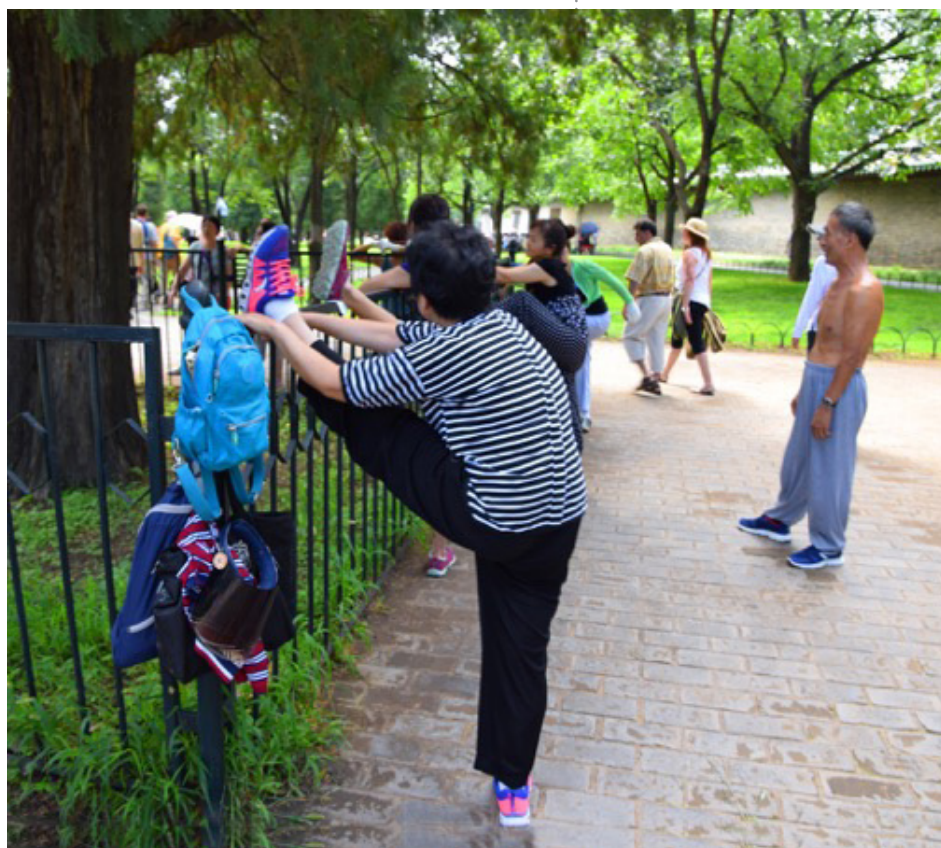
Once we were up and running with it, we started to draw a crowd. Westerners practicing Qigong gets the attention of the Chinese, especially doing as bizarre-looking a routine as this one. What I loved about about the Chinese people is that if your Qigong looked interesting to them, they would join in and try it out—respectfully and on the periphery of the group, but they would jump right in just to see how it felt.

We finished our sessions with an integration time, which mainly consisted of lying faceup in the grass, feeling the warmth of the sun, the energy of the earth, and the Qi flow within.

Afterward, we headed back to South Gate and the section with the exercise equipment. It was packed with people. Off at the far end, I spotted a high bar and a man doing giant swings on it. I headed over there. This was a section of gymnastic equipment with a gathering of shirtless older men showing their skills and strength despite their age. The man doing giant swings hopped off the bar and walked over to another piece of equipment. I gave him a thumbs up, and he nodded at me.

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The Big Dipper Star Stepping Qigong practice attracted onlookers of all ages.

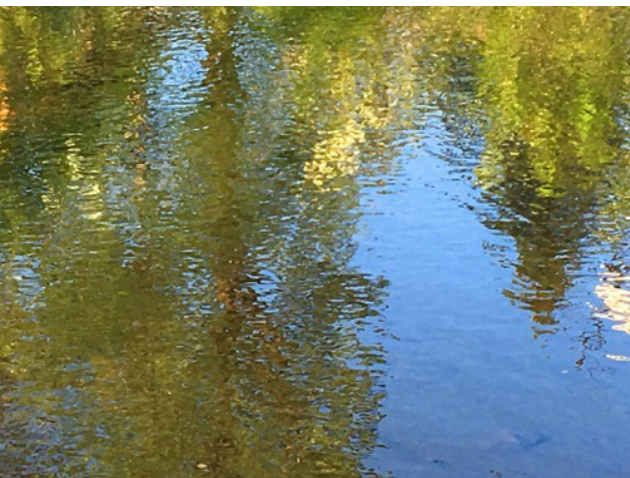
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Chinese fitness enthusiasts care as much about flexible hamstrings as Americans do about six-pack abs.



Unbelievably, he looked to be in his late sixties, short, with a Jack LaLanne physique and a full head of white hair.

Another man was hanging by his knees on a parallel ladder doing inverted sit-ups and crashing his back loudly against the rungs as if to say, “I could break this if I wanted to.” There were other men in friendly competition with each other, impressing the foreigners, and not unaware of the women, who were giving them a run for their money. One middle-aged woman kipped up on the parallel bars into an inverted shoulder stand then a handstand and then flowed through a graceful sequence of movements with impossible strength and flexibility. She dismounted and began coaching a young teen on the finer points of flexible hamstrings.

Everywhere I went, people would grab their heels and pull their legs into the air or drape them over a fence or some of the equipment designed for hamstring work. As far as I could tell, the Chinese love flexible hamstrings the way we’re obsessed with six-pack abs.



The workouts seemed to hit a pause. The performers took some well-deserved breaks. My white-haired friend hopped off a pull-up bar, squatted down, and lit up a cigarette. Jack LaLanne would not approve.

This seemed to be our cue to leave. As we walked through the South Gate, I took one last look at Tian Tan Park, as I knew I wouldn’t be back—at least not until my next trip to China.

Upcoming Classes and Schedule Changes

There are exciting classes on the horizon for this fall.

Monday Night Weapons Class 7:30–8:30:

Beginning Oct. 7, we will start to learn the T’ai Chi Sword Form. This graceful and powerful form develops stances and footwork, waist and leg power, and projecting energy beyond the hands. In addition to the Sword Form, we will learn the 13 fundamental sword techniques in a gradual three-techniques-at-a-time manner. Some partner work featuring the 13 techniques will also be included. Open to those who have completed the T’ai Chi Solo Form.

T’ai Chi 43 Postures Form—Tuesday Night 6:00–7:25, Saturday Morning 11:30–12:25: We will learn to combine Symmetries 1, 2, and 3.

Starting in October, we will begin to learn Symmetry 4, which covers the postures Cross Hands, Embrace Tiger Return to Mountain, Fist Under Elbow, Repulse the Monkey, Diagonal Flying, Fan Through the Back, and Turn and Chop with Fist.

Section Two of the Solo Form increases the difficulty and complexity of the postures and sequence of the form. Symmetry 4 reflects this complexity and is a longer, more intricate sequence. Don’t miss out on the fun! Prerequisite: Symmetry 1, 2, 3.

Come and learn Symmetry 1 if you’ve finished the Solo Form.

Wednesday Night Healing Tao Meditation

7:30–8:45: Beginning Sept. 4, we’ll start a 12-week course in internal Qi breathing, rooting, bone breathing, and marrow cleansing. This class is one of the Healing Tao Fundamentals series of courses.

Our bones pair structure and function, strength and lightness, and are living organs that make our red and white blood cells and produce electrical current when properly stimulated. Taoist masters saw the bones as much more than physical structure and protection for our organs. Bones are highly

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Impressionistic
reflections: Erdao
Baihe Park, China

porous and are always breathing; they draw in oxygen, nutrition, and blood.

In this course, we will learn the Taoist methods for bone breathing and compression and marrow cleansing to help create optimal marrow growth and bone health as we age. We will learn internal Qi breathing methods that assist the process. We will learn to get grounded and stay grounded through specific rooting practices, learn a bone breathing Qigong, and more. Experience your bones in a new way. Free to members; \$144 for nonmembers.

Saturday Morning Eclectics 9:30–10:25: This class teaches how to strike and throw combinations of punches with proper body mechanics, flow, and rhythm to maximize leverage and conserve energy. And you'll learn how to train with a partner using safety training gear: focus mitts, punch balls, and foam sticks. It's also a

lot of fun. This class develops an understanding of the striking aspects of T'ai Chi. Beginners are welcome.

Saturday Morning 12 Animals 10:30–11:25: The 12 Animals is the foundation practice for the Liu Ho Pa Fa system. Beginning Sept. 7, we will begin learning the Pang, which is a mythological animal that teaches three levels of pulling power. Beginners are welcome.

Our Cups Runneth Over

The studio thanks you for keeping reusable mugs on hand! Some of them, however, haven't been used since Y2K. Please claim yours by the end of August so the extras can be removed and new members can add a cup to the shelf. Thanks.

Question of the Month

Question: I've been hearing about the vagus nerve and a condition called vagal tone as contributing to stress reduction and overall health. What exactly is vagal tone, and does the practice of T'ai Chi have a positive effect on the vagus nerve and in creating vagal tone?

Answer: The short answer is yes. The regular practice of T'ai Chi can have a significant and positive effect on the vagus nerve and contribute to creating vagal tone.

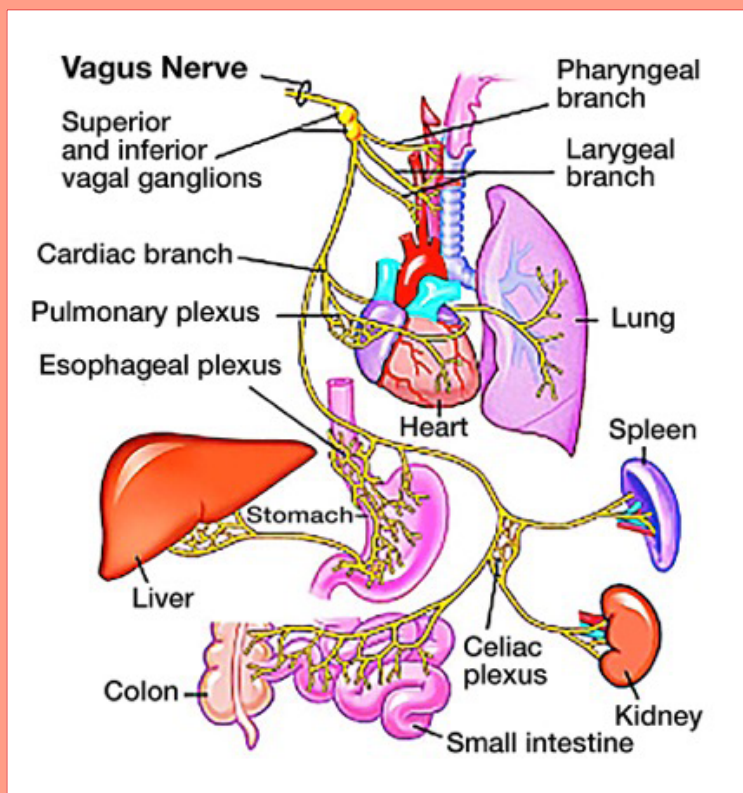
We need to know a little about the vagus nerve itself in order to understand vagal tone. There are 12 cranial nerves in the body. Cranial nerves are the nerves that emerge directly from the brain, as opposed to nerves that emerge from the spinal cord. Cranial nerves relay information primarily to and from regions of the head and neck, with one exception: the tenth cranial nerve, called the vagus nerve. "Vagus" means "wandering" in Latin and describes well the nerve's long, serpentine path from the brain stem to the heart, lungs, and gut.

The head, heart, and gut are the three primary energy centers in Chinese medicine and meditation and are centers for the management and processing of emotions. This is consistent with Western science, as the flow of information and perceptions travels in both directions via the vagus nerve and the enteric nervous system of the gut: head to heart to gut and back again. This is why we have a strong gut reaction and heart reaction to intense mental and emotional states.

The vagus nerve also branches out to touch and interact with the other vital organs as well as switching on our involuntary nervous center. This is the para-

sympathetic nervous system, which regulates homeostasis, or the resting state, for a majority of body functions such as heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, digestion, and many others.

Vagal tone, then, is an index for the high functioning of the vagus nerve and the entire parasympathetic nervous system. This allows the various systems of the body to work together for the benefit of the whole and produces a state of rest and relaxation in which the body can heal and repair itself. This state is called a high vagal tone index and is associated with physical and psychological well-being. Stress, fatigue, anxiety, and even bad posture can inflame the vagus nerve, creating a low vagal tone index associated with inflammation, depression, loneliness, heart attack, stroke, and other chronic diseases.



Studies show that T'ai Chi can increase vagus nerve activity and stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system. Moving slowly as well as breathing slowly and deeply triggers receptors in your heart and neck called baroreceptors. They send a signal from the heart to the brain that activates the vagus nerve, which connects back to the heart and lowers blood pressure and heart rate. One or two rounds of the Solo Form a day, plus adding Qigong, meditation, or other forms of exercise, especially with other people that create positive social relationships, creates a high vagal tone index.

Or as T.T. Liang used to say about his daily T'ai Chi practice: "Every day, I take a 30 minute trip to paradise."