

VoyageMinnesota

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Exploring Life & Business with Paul Abdella of Twin Cities T'ai Chi

Today we'd like to introduce you to Paul Abdella.

Hi Paul, we'd love for you to start by introducing yourself

I began practicing martial arts at the age of 10, at the Saint Paul Judo Club. In a few years, I also started wrestling. I loved both sports, especially Judo. At one point, when I was 14, I was asked to teach some beginning students at the Judo school when one of the junior instructors was out sick. To my surprise, I found I could explain things to the young students in a way they could understand. My interest in teaching had begun.

After several years of Judo practice, I began to have pain and swelling in both of my knees. I needed to find another martial art that didn't involve grappling and kept me off my knees. So, at the height of the Bruce Lee craze, I began looking for a Kung Fu instructor. In the interim, I developed an interest in meditation and began to learn how to meditate at a local center when I was 19. Soon thereafter, I began practicing a Southern Chinese Kung Fu style that emphasized close-range fighting skills but also introduced me to various aspects of Chinese culture and philosophy such as Chi, Yin Yang theory, breathing methods, and internal power.

Once, while having a private lesson with my teacher, he began to perform a series of movements that I had never seen before. They were slow, deliberate, dance-like, and uncharacteristic of the lightning-fast Kung Fu style he had been teaching me. I asked what it was and he told me it was T'ai Chi Ch'uan. I thought the movements were beautiful and I wanted to learn it; I asked if he would teach me.

He generously said he would introduce me to his teacher. I met with the T'ai Chi teacher and had a first lesson. At the end of the lesson, the teacher told me that a famous T'ai Chi master had moved to St. Cloud recently, and he and a few other local T'ai Chi teachers were studying with him. He invited me to drive up with him and meet the master and possibly be accepted as a student.

We drove up to St. Cloud together one Saturday morning and I met 82-year-old T.T. Liang. After being introduced, I offered him some gifts I had brought, including a drawing I had done, and asked if he would accept me as a student. He was reluctant because I hadn't studied T'ai Chi before. After some hesitation he said I could stand in the back of the room and try and follow along. From that day forward I had a semi-private lesson every Saturday morning with Master Liang from 1982 through 1989, where I learned his complete T'ai Chi Ch'uan system. T.T. Liang once told me, "In the twinkle of an eye, a young man becomes an old man—be wise about how you spend your time", and so, in a twinkle, I had a 20-year relationship with him and was one of only four students invited by his family to attend his funeral, where I gave a eulogy; he was 102 years old.

Paul Abdella



Performing the T'ai Chi Sword Form



Painting by Paul Abdella



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Lighting the altar



Performing the T'ai Chi Solo Form.



Paul Abdella and T.T. Liang, 1984

“We bring the best of the past to the present, so our members can create their future with harmony and balance.”

Early on, some of Master Liang’s students met during the week at a small studio in St. Paul to practice together what we were learning in St. Cloud. One of the students had rented the space and started a small T’ai Chi school there in 1984. Soon, one of Liang’s senior students from Boston moved to the Twin Cities to continue studying with him; he also became the senior Instructor at the school. I started teaching there in 1990 and eventually partnered with him from 1993 to 2016 as a non-profit T’ai Chi school.

In 2016 I became the chief instructor and executive director of the school, Twin Cities T’ai Chi, and developed the curriculum that supports our mission to “teach the art, science, and spirit of T’ai Chi and related practices, to improve the quality of life for our members and community”. We teach a complete system of T’ai Chi and other internal martial arts, meditation, and Qigong (chee gong). After more than 50 years of practice, I still experience great joy in sharing the power of moving the body, deepening the breath, and quieting the mind through ancient practices that seem as relevant today as when they were created.

Would you say it’s been a smooth road, and if not, what are some of the biggest challenges you’ve faced along the way?

Learning from traditional teachers, especially those from other cultures, requires patience, understanding, and humility. One cannot progress to the next level when they feel they are ready, they progress when the teacher feels they are ready. This can be a source of frustration and requires great patience and understanding. Sometimes language and cultural customs are also a barrier to learning.

Traveling the distance required to meet and learn with a teacher is also an issue. I traveled 150 miles round trip every week for nearly 7 years to learn from my primary T’ai Chi teacher. I studied regularly with a grandmaster from Chicago for 10 years. Once, in the early days, when I didn’t have much money, I drove to Chicago from Minneapolis, an 8 hour drive, spent the day studying with him, and then drove home in the same day. Later, when I could afford it, I would fly down and stay in a hotel which was convenient but expensive.

I traveled seven times to the Blue Ridge mountains and back to gain a teaching certification from another teacher. Finally, I traveled to China on two separate occasions for an extended period to study in the monasteries and caves up in the mountains in remote areas that were difficult to get to and required traveling with translators to communicate.

My classes are offered in the evenings and on weekends when people are not working, straining family and social life, due to time away from them when most people are home together.

Thanks – so what else should our readers know about Twin Cities T’ai Chi?

T’ai Chi is a movement practice that developed in China about 800 years ago with roots that go back even farther. It traditionally has four major components: health, philosophy, meditation, and martial arts.

Twin Cities T’ai Chi brings these elements together in a unique way, making them accessible to adults of all ages with whatever focus fits their needs. We specialize in helping our members to relax, create better balance, and reduce stress through movement that is fluid, properly aligned, and grounded.

We bring the best of the past to the present, so our members can create their future with harmony and balance.

Is there something surprising that you feel even people who know you might not know about?

I’ve been a martial artist for more than 50 years, but also a visual artist and classically trained painter who’s shown and sold his work through galleries and to private collectors.