

Tai Chi and Standing Meditation
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In the late summer of 2005, I felt worn down and fatigued in a way that I had never experienced before. For the previous six months, I had been living a double-life: week days in Seattle, working very long hours on a software project, and week ends in Portland, where I live. So it was easy to attribute my fatigue and lethargy to the grueling commute and work schedule that I had been keeping. And in the grand tradition of software developers, I kept on ... keeping on. (We write code: therefore we are.)

What finally got me in to see a physician was a mild ear infection. To my surprise, my blood pressure was high – about 135/90. This was another thing that had never happened before. I started tracking my blood pressure over the next week. I found that it was oscillating up and down through the course of a day, sometimes normal, sometimes high. My physician suggested a physical, and I was alarmed enough to agree (I am one of those males with a wary disposition towards doctors).

The physical exam produced yet another surprise. My fasting blood sugar was very, very high, about 300mg/dL (a normal reading would range from 80 – 100 mg/dL). An HbA1c test, which is a measure of one's average blood sugar level over the preceding 60 to 90 days, also came back high. The normal range for the HbA1C test is 5.0 to 6.0, and my initial reading was 7.7. The conclusion: I was a type II diabetic. With type II diabetes, one's body produces insulin, but is resistant to that insulin. Since insulin helps regulate the process of metabolizing blood sugar, my body was not keeping my blood sugar inside normal limits. This also explained the oscillating blood pressure.

Some major life changes were in order, and I systematically set about them. My doctor started me on glucophage, 1000mg twice a day. I consulted a naturopathic physician, who recommended chromium picolinate, 500 micrograms twice a day, and gymnema sylvestre, 500mg twice a day. I started running four days a week. I also made some radical shifts in my diet, cutting both portions and eliminating foods with high glycemic indexes.

Over the course of the next nine months, I got a lot healthier. I lost over fifty pounds of weight. The lethargy disappeared. My blood pressure stabilized in the normal range. My focus and concentration at work got better. My average blood sugar level dropped. The HbA1C readings came down from an initial value of 7.7, to settle at 6.3, which is close to normal range of 5.0 to 6.0. My doctor was happy; from her standpoint, the diabetes was controlled, with one prescription medication at a relatively low dosage. In the allopathic medical view, this was as good as it got.

However, I wasn't satisfied. I wanted to get my blood sugar level back down into the normal range. My exercise program was also getting problematic. The running was starting to bother my knees and feet. (As diabetics are very susceptible to peripheral

vascular damage this was not a small concern.) Since I had been a competitive swimmer in high school, I considered swimming as an option. Yes, swimming is very, very low impact aerobic exercise ... but I also knew my own weaknesses. The prospect of hitting the water on cold, dark winter mornings was not an attractive one. But I had to find something to replace the running. And I was determined to get my average blood sugar down below that plateau level of 6.3. You can't have bad health effects from high blood sugar if your blood sugar isn't high to start with.

The other exercise I had done as a teenager was ... Tai Chi. In high school, I had taken lessons from an elderly gentleman named Abraham Liu. Mr. Liu taught me the Yang short form of Tai Chi, and I had stayed with it for about three years until the demands of college studies and work made regular practice difficult. My experience of Yang Tai Chi was that it was not particularly aerobic. But my best friend, Joe Wolf, was a student of the Chen style, which is considerably more vigorous. Perhaps he could recommend a teacher.

Joe directed me to Sifu Gregory Fong. My original intention was to study the Chen style. Mr. Fong watched me thrash through an initial class period, then diplomatically suggested I start out in his Yang style class. "Try that for a while. Get stronger. Chen style takes a lot of strength."

Mr. Fong started me off with the practice of the "Health Stance". Even the "soft" Yang form requires a considerable amount of leg strength, and my legs were weak, the product of twenty-odd years of flying a desk. In the Health Stance, one stands with the legs equally weighted, about shoulder width apart, the knees slightly bent, "As if you were trying to sit down in a chair and stand up from the chair at the same time." There is a set of hand and arm postures that go with the stance, but I used the basic one that is much like holding a large beach ball in front of your chest. It's much harder than it sounds: the first time I attempted the stance I think I held it for all of four minutes.

"Don't worry so much about the Tai Chi form in the beginning", Mr. Fong told me. "Practice the Health Stance as much as you can. The form is like going to college. But before college comes kindergarten." I quickly found that at every class session, we were going to practice standing for at least 15 to 20 minutes. The conclusion was obvious: I started practicing the Health Stance daily at home, and worked up to 20 to 25 minutes per day.

After three months of near-daily standing, I went in for my quarterly medical checkup. This time, another surprise, but a pleasant one. My HbA1C number was 5.8. Just inside the normal range. How had this happened? My medication dosage had not changed. My diet – which I very closely control – had not changed. My weight had not significantly changed in months. The only thing I was doing different was going to Tai Chi class twice a week and standing in the Health Stance on a daily basis.

Shortly after this, I was practicing the Yang form in class with one of Mr. Fong's senior students. Paul adjusted my torso and head to get me closer to the correct posture. This brought most of my weight down onto my rear leg. In ten seconds, I realized that the "gentle" Yang form – correctly executed – is a substantial workout. In two minutes, I could not hold the posture correctly any more. As with all true lessons, this was both humbling and valuable. I went to Mr. Fong. "I'm standing twenty minutes or a little bit more each day, but I think I need to get stronger. Paul just corrected my stance and I realized that I'm about one sixth as strong as I thought I was." Mr. Fong nodded as if this realization was to be expected.

Mr. Fong introduced me to the "Combat Stance". One sinks one's weight onto one leg, and takes a small step forward with the unweighted leg. Then the weight is distributed as one crouches, seventy percent on the back leg, thirty percent on the front. And here I thought the Health Stance was difficult at the beginning! "Five minutes, each side. Do not straighten up." I think I made it three minutes the first time. Now in addition to practicing the Health Stance for 20 minutes a day, I practice the Combat Stance for 5 minutes on each leg. I have no doubt that many further challenges await me. (It is slowly dawning on me that there is no "end" to martial arts practice, only the embracing of new and deeper challenges.)

I went in for another quarterly medical checkup. My HbA1C number was 5.7. The 5.8 reading of three months earlier was not a fluke. My blood sugar level has been normal for six months. My blood pressure is now better than normal – 114/72. All diabetics are taught the five linchpins of treatment: control your weight, control your diet, exercise, take your medication as prescribed, and monitor your blood sugar. I've now added a sixth linchpin: the daily practice of standing meditation and Tai Chi. I believe it's making a very real difference to my health.