

T'ai Chi: Pathway To Health

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I have been attending Sifu Gregory Fong's Yang T'ai Chi class for over six years. When I began, I knew nothing about T'ai Chi or the Martial Arts and I was a long way from being athletic. I had no idea that, through T'ai Chi, I would be able to transform my life with long-term positive effects. I was referred to the class for reasons of health. When I entered my first class, I was stooped, fragile and continually walked with a shuffling gate. I had been diagnosed with a hereditary, progressive, neurological condition similar to Parkinson's disease and was largely immobilized and bed-ridden.

Sifu Fong introduced me to the concept of the mind-body connection and began my training with the sitting meditation exercises because I was unable to do any of the floor exercises, including standing meditation. To sit as Sifu instructed me was strenuous, mentally and physically; it involved using the mind to create work for the body *without* doing the real thing. For example, while I was in the sitting meditation pose and without moving, Sifu instructed me to use my mind to direct my muscles to continually experience the *sensation* of playing piano with my fingers and toes while holding heavy buckets and simultaneously standing up and sitting down. Paradoxically, this was accomplished by doing the real thing (as directed by my mind) *without* doing the real thing (one doesn't really hold buckets). This may seem confusing at first and is best understood by personal experience while under guidance in class.

At first, I was only able to do each exercise for a matter of a few minutes and, in some cases, only seconds. I found that my mind would wander and my muscles quickly fatigued. So, I began to do those exercises at home daily in order to increase the duration of each. Sifu gave me a log to record my daily progress and to chart the amount of time I did the prescribed meditation. In addition, I recorded my pulse rate before and immediately following the exercise. In this way I was better able to understand that a standing meditation, or even a sitting exercise, if properly performed with intention and intensity, is an aerobic exercise. Since I was a novice to the complex nature of T'ai Chi, the chart allowed me to visually see my progress, satisfied my scientific background, and provided encouragement.

Although Sifu advised me to not expect outright results for three to six months, I began to see improvements much earlier. I became aware of new muscle development and incremental increases in my stamina. My circulation improved and for the first time in my life, I had warm hands, even in the winter. By the end of the first year I was able to do some of the floor exercises, and I was doing the standing meditation exercises 20 to 40 minutes a day. Once Sifu understood my physical abilities, he did not let me off the hook just because I had some physical challenges. He insightfully directed my exercises by increasing the level of physical and mental activities in order to constantly challenge me.

When I was more secure in my physical progress I found I was able to decrease my prescription medications and still maintain my physical stability. In fact, I was able to go completely off the medications for an extended time. This allowed my body to stabilize into its own rhythms and be free of overwhelming drug side-effects that added to the complexity of my condition. I do not advise going off medications without careful consultation with one's doctor. Every case is different and multiple factors must be taken into consideration. In my situation, once stabilized, I was then able to work with my new specialist to more clearly select a long-term course of action and titration of medications that better suited my medical condition.

With the success and encouragement generated in those early classes, I set my intention to use Sifu's training methods to re-wire my body's neuronal system. In particular, I believe it was dedication to standing meditation that improved my physical status, using the mind-body connection re-teach my muscles how to move. The standing meditation as taught by Sifu Fong is done with alertness of mind and intention concurrent with a paradoxical mix of relaxation while still performing heavy muscular work. This unusual mixture was the very structure I needed to be able to use my mind to connect with long unused/misused pathways to my muscles. I learned how to re-direct or over-ride the aberrant signals that were being sent to my muscles. With time, I learned to use the benefits of T'ai Chi intention all day long.

Standing meditation is difficult for students at all levels but the results are worth the effort. Benefits of this training include increased muscle strength, release of muscle tension, improved posture and balance, improved breathing and, most amazing for me, an increase in energy. In addition to the physical benefits of T'ai Chi, increased mental alertness and clarity become available with training.

Often new students arrive at their first class in very poor physical condition. Examples of this may include: young people who are not physically fit due to lack of exercise and older people who are unfit due to years of inactivity, frequently complicated by unresolved medical problems. For many, their mental image of what to expect from T'ai Chi involves a group of relaxed people gently waving their arms in the air. A new student may be shocked at the strenuous reality of the class. At this point, some may give up and quit before they achieve any result. I vigorously encourage new students to persevere. It takes time to overcome years of physical inactivity or neglect and, if medical problems are an additional complication, these need to be factored into any exercise program. Nevertheless, advancement can be achieved.

Beginning T'ai Chi training in poor condition is not a deterrent for this class and, in fact, it could be used as the very inspiration to change one's self for the better. However, in order to overcome physical challenges, the student must be willing to give a commitment of time to attend classes and develop the motivation to follow through with assignments. Progress toward better health can be obtained only if the student is willing to discipline his or her mind and be prepared to put in the required physical hard work. In T'ai Chi training there is no shortcut around the need for physical hard work and mental discipline. I would advise new students to not be discouraged by their beginning physical

abilities or intimidated by seeing some of the advanced training. Within each class, there are multiple training levels and no matter what level we attain, Sifu makes each of us work hard, according to our own physical and mental abilities, regardless of age or physical problems. T'ai Chi training is a constantly evolving art that promotes life-long habits of pursuing physical and mental health.

I have continued to practice T'ai Chi with dedication and enthusiasm and I am now able to do the warm-up exercises, the full compliment of floor exercises, the T'ai Chi form (Yang style, long form) and the standing meditation. This does not mean that I am without symptoms or difficulties; each class is a challenge as well as a triumph. My success is contrary to conventional medical expectations and even my own family history. For me, T'ai Chi training has proved to be a pathway to health and has dramatically improved the quality of my life.