

## Health and the Martial Arts

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At fifty years old I looked back over my shoulder at decades of practice in a popular martial arts style. No matter how well I thought I understood the principles of this art, accidents still happened. It seemed I wasn't healing as well as I used to from the bruises. I'd put on weight, and was having trouble with my knees and back. Was this something I could continue to pursue as I grew older?

I'd seen pictures of groups of elderly Chinese doing Taijiquan in the parks. Out of curiosity I tried an introductory class at a local community center. It seemed a good balance of stretching and exercise so, after the class ended, I wanted to learn more.

I visited a few schools, then attended a class taught by Sifu Gregory Fong. That evening shattered my preconceptions about the soft, gentle art of Taijiquan. After a few questions about my overall health and the condition of various body parts, he asked if I liked pain? It didn't take long to find out why. I hadn't pushed myself physically, or sweat that much, in years.

On my way home I mulled over what Sifu Fong had said about the need to build strength in order to have energy for any quality of life in old age. Wait too long and it could become too late, especially with years of accumulated bad habits. I thought about why I practiced the martial arts? If for self-defense, wouldn't it be more efficient to learn to use a handgun? If hand-to-hand combat has value, at what cost to long-term health?

I'd been in a system known for its close-range fighting skills. Each movement was considered natural and designed to avoid stress on the joints. Elbows stay close to the body to protect the ribs and maximize leverage. Knees point towards each other to protect the centerline. Arms and legs form a wedge aimed at an opponent, while the head is held back at a safe distance. Although training equipment is used to toughen the forearms, relaxation is constantly stressed. Each technique and concept fit into a unified system. But no mention was made of health.

Now, after a month at Sifu Fong's school, I've noted similarities with, and differences from, my previous training. The similarities are often in principles, the differences usually in how they're

applied. Before I left my first class, Sifu Fong had given me exercises to help with the pain in my knees and lower back. During class we stood in postures that work both the mind and body, but put no stress on the joints, require no equipment, and need no space other than enough to stand in. In a matter of minutes my muscles ached and I stood in a pool of sweat. He warned me the process would be painful (where muscles are concerned that old saying “no pain, no gain” is unfortunately true) and there would be no shortcuts, but also no secrets. I’d get out of it only what I put in.

So far, pride helps keep me going—knowing classmates older than I am able to do many more repetitions of exercises than I can. And I’ve already felt improvement. My biggest challenge will be whether or not I have the mental endurance to continue to push myself on a daily basis outside class.

I emphasize the aching and the shaking, since this is probably the primary concern of most beginners in Sifu Fong’s classes. From what I’ve seen so far, it could be a never-ending continuum of increasing strength, and ongoing pain. Sifu explained how the postures in my former training blocked circulation and the flow of blood and energy, stressed the knees and hips, and put an unnatural strain on the lower back. Now I better understand the significant difference between muscle pain and joint pain; between good pain and bad pain. And I’ve had glimpses of much more. I’ve only begun the intense mental effort involved in the standing practice, and have heard of its applicability to movement. I have a form to learn, and I’ve seen other students practice weapons and a sensitivity drill something like the one in my old style.

The path ahead may not be clear but the benefits are. It feels good to be starting something new, and to put myself in the hands of a teacher who knows the way and who can not only teach me more about the martial arts but, at the same time, improve my chances for a long and healthy life.