

# Wudang



4/21



A MONTHLY E-NEWSLETTER

## From Sifu Paul

Greetings, everyone,

I always love the month of April—the bird-song, the rain, the greening. World T'ai Chi Day is on the last Saturday of the month—where the whole world does a round of T'ai Chi at 10:00 a.m. in your local time zone. Let's not forget Earth Day on the 22ND, that annual homage to the place where we live.

Also on April 22, I will be having hip replacement surgery in Saint Paul. Much of this issue of Wudang is devoted to the tale of what led up to this event for me.

Also in this issue: news of our upcoming, slowly expanding schedule; classes with our talented team of tutors—and more. I'm looking forward to seeing you all in a few weeks.

## April, Springtime, and a New Quarter

Thanks to all of you who have paid dues and made donations to the studio for the second quarter, which began in April. Membership dues help to offset our overhead and keep the studio operating and growing. We welcome your support like the spring rain and sunshine.

## Class Schedule, Changes, and New Classes

- Monday and Thursday Solo Form classes are at 6:00 p.m. on Zoom.
- Wednesday Solo Form class is at 6:00 p.m., and the Saturday Solo Form class is at 12:30



p.m. They will be live in the studio (15-person limit; online registration required), and both of these classes will be simulcast on Zoom.

- There will be no Tuesday-afternoon class until further notice.
- Starting in June, we will add two beginning Solo Form classes. The days and times will be announced.
- There will be at least one outdoor class this summer beginning in June and a gradually expanding schedule throughout the summer.

## My Journey With FAI

In the spring of 2015, my wife and I met friends for brunch one Sunday morning. We took a short walk afterward before getting in our car and heading for home. As we started to walk, I began to experience pain in my right hip; this was a deep pain that made it

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Sifu Paul explains what has led to his hip replacement.

difficult to walk. We turned around after a short distance and went back to the car. On the ride home, I was trying to think about what I might have done in the last few days or week that would trigger that kind of pain and restricted movement. I couldn't think of anything. My wife Mary suggested I see an orthopedic doctor and recommended a clinic to me. After I rested my leg for a few hours and then stretched it out, the pain began to diminish. I made an appointment the following day with a doctor at the clinic.

## The Diagnosis

At the orthopedic clinic, I explained to the doctor what had happened, what I do for a living, and a bit of my personal history, active lifestyle, and a few of my notable injuries from the past. He sent me in for X-rays, where they took three of both my hips from different angles. Once the X-rays came back from the lab, the doctor put them up on a light table to discuss them with me. He told me I had something called FAI in both of my hips. Femoral acetabular impingement (FAI) is a condition in which extra bone grows along one or both of the bones that form the hip joint—the ball-shaped head of the femur (thigh bone) and the socket in the hip bone (acetabulum) it fits into. With FAI, either the femoral head or the acetabulum has an irregular shape, or sometimes they both do. Because they do not fit together perfectly, the bones rub against each other during movement—the impingement.

The head of the femur is covered by a slippery cartilage, and the socket of the acetabulum is lined with a strong fibrocartilage. These fit together and make a tight seal and a smooth, low-friction surface that allows the bones to glide easily over each other during movement. In a hip with FAI, the extra bone creates extra friction that can wear down the slippery cartilage on the femur and wear down or tear the lining of the acetabulum (called the labrum), causing pain, restricting movement, and eventually, if bone-on-bone friction results, creating osteoarthritis.

My left hip had only a slight wearing of the

labrum and cartilage, but the right hip had two areas where it was worn down with not a lot of the cushion left in either area. I asked the doctor what causes this condition, and he said it was congenital. I asked him what could be done about it; he replied, “get some physical therapy, steroid injections, and put off your hip replacement as long as possible.”

This was a disappointing diagnosis and prescription. I started researching alternatives and vowed to do what I could to slow and, if possible, reverse the degeneration in my hip.



## Finding a Way to Heal

Since a loss of space in the joint was the source of my pain and restricted mobility, it made sense to me to create more space in the joint. I created my own program of stretching and tissue work that seemed to be working, as I remained pain free for the remainder of 2015 and 2016. I had my first trip to China in August of that year: three weeks of mostly foot travel in Beijing, Xian, Mt. Hua, and Mt.

## Contact Us

For timely updates, follow Twin Cities T'ai Chi Ch'uan on **Facebook**.

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**Femoral acetabular impingement (FAI) is a condition in which extra bone grows along one or both of the bones that form the hip joint..**

Chaingbai. A significant part of that trip involved climbing Hua Mountain. Thousands of hand-carved steps in the August heat at a nearly vertical pitch left me thoroughly exhausted, but my hips carried me through the entire trip without incident, both for the remainder of the trip and for the rest of 2016.

The year 2017 was a different story. Chronic pain began to emerge slowly until it was fairly intense, making it difficult to raise my leg and limiting my range of motion in other movements of the hip; walking was painful and running impossible. I've been active in my body my entire life; sometimes you get injured. It was time to find some outside help.

It's important to know what type of healing modality to use for a specific condition. It seems one needs to work with either the body's structure; soft tissue; electricity via the nervous system, chemistry, energy; or spirit, depending on what needs healing. Don't call a plumber if you need an electrician. I felt I needed to move bones, but through muscle and tissue work.

A friend recommended a chiropractor that did structural integration through soft-tissue manipulation in place of conventional chiropractic adjustments. We started to work together in June and continued meeting once or twice a week through September. She was very skillful at testing muscles and finding ways to get them to release their tension patterns caused by chronic pain. Eventually, my bones began to realign, and my hip pain was reduced.

I also worked with a Rossiter therapist, a myofascial release technique, at the same time. Unfortunately, she was based in Hudson, Wisconsin. I did a weekly session for two months that also reduced my pain levels and had me walking more freely. A therapy schedule like that is unsustainable, as it is both time-consuming and expensive, but it got me to a new level of comfort and mobility. I took a break from all therapies and focused on T'ai Chi, Qigong, and stretching.

In October, I scheduled my first steroid shot. My pain levels had begun elevating, so I



thought I would use allopathic medicine to at least mask my symptoms for a while. I made an appointment with an orthopedic surgeon and sports medicine physician, Dr. Johnson. The lobby of his clinic was a veritable museum of memorabilia gifted by athletes of every persuasion: signed photographs, balls, and jerseys; donated trophies and medals; there was even a championship belt from a professional wrestler, all united in praising the doctor and his staff for patching them up, healing their injuries, and extending their careers. Although all the major sports were represented, hockey had the most testimonials.

More X-rays of my hips were taken. When the doctor came in to review them with me, my hips looked much the same to me with perhaps a little more degeneration in the right hip. He told me about my hip condition; I acted like I hadn't heard it before. I asked him, as if for the first time, what causes FAI?

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10-year old Paul Abdella demonstrates the first martial arts technique he ever learned, on his brother Joel (In his pajama Gi).

The technique is O Goshi. Translation: Major Hip Throw.

## The Benefit of Experience

During my medical leave, I'm pleased to announce that two of our veteran instructors, Kim Husband and Christopher Knutson, will be leading our online and live-in-the-studio classes.

This is a wonderful opportunity to experience their teaching and benefit from the wisdom of their experience and their practice of T'ai Chi Ch'uan. — Paul

### Kim Husband

Kim has studied and practiced T'ai Chi at the studio for 24 years and studied at other schools for a couple years before that.

A happy accident brought her to T'ai Chi. In college, she went to the theater building to meet someone, but they didn't show up. She did, however, notice a T'ai Chi demonstration happening and went to see that instead. She was hooked and has been practicing ever since. "The greatest benefits I've found in T'ai Chi are that I am my best self while practicing—relaxed, focused, patient, adaptable—and I meet the most interesting people through the studio." Kim has learned the full curriculum of T'ai Chi practices the studio offers and has taught all of them at various times. She also teaches her own class in Hastings called Blue Dragon T'ai Chi. "I like teaching T'ai Chi because it's fun to share something I enjoy and because I love seeing people go home smiling."

### Christopher Knutson

Christopher has been practicing T'ai Chi for 19 years. He was looking for a nonaggressive movement meditation practice to keep himself limber and that had a function besides just stretching. He found it in T'ai Chi and at the studio. "Besides the beautiful community that came with the studio, T'ai Chi has given me a sense of personal strength and centering that allows me to live a calmer life with more resilience." His study of T'ai Chi moved from practice into teaching. "I am a teacher at heart. I started my working career as an elementary teacher. It is a pleasure to see students' progress through the form, and it makes my form better."

To my surprise, he gave a different answer. In his opinion, it was a condition acquired primarily during the first two decades of life, when we generate the majority of our bone mass, with the most significant growth spurt occurring during adolescence. By age 18, skeletal growth is mostly complete. There's a slow continuation of growth until the age of 30, when we reach a state of maximum strength and density known as peak bone mass. Repetitive movements found in certain sports and activities seem to contribute to misshaping the bones of the joints of the hip during this growth-spurt period. Hockey

seems to be a sport that promotes this condition, and a lot of studies verify this finding. I asked him about Judo, wrestling, and a few of the other sports I participated in during that time, and he said there weren't any studies done on less popular sports.

I began practicing Judo at the age of 10 and took thousands of falls on my hips over a six-and-a-half-year period. I was on the wrestling team four years in a row; I went out for gymnastics and tumbling for two years to improve my ukemi (falling techniques) for Judo; and I participated in track

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and field for three seasons, throwing the shot put and discus.

In my neighborhood, we started playing street hockey in the fall after school until the ponds would freeze over and the local hockey rink would get flooded. I joined a hockey league and played for five years on rough outdoor ice all but my last season, when an indoor ice rink was built nearby. Add downhill skiing and Little League baseball to the list, and my resume of activity between the ages of 10 and 17 was complete.

After my steroid injection, I did a little research to verify what I had learned about FAI. The following excerpt seems an adequate representation:

“The research in regards to FAI in hockey populations is staggering. In a study by world renowned hip specialist Dr. Marc Phillipon, of the Steadman Philippon Research Institute in Vail, CO, he found the following:

#### Femoral Acetabular Impingement (FAI)

- Pee Wee (10–12 years old): 37% had FAI
- Bantam (13–15 years old): 68% had FAI
- Midget (16–19 years old): 93% had FAI

#### Hip Labral Tears

- Pee Wee (10–12 years old): 48% had labral tears
- Bantam (13–15 years old): 63% had labral tears
- Midget (16–19 years old): 93% had labral tears

Studies show that by Midget age (16–19 years old) 93% of hockey players show signs and symptoms of the condition, with limited hip flexion and a loss of internal rotation & adduction of the hip.

So, if 93% of Midget level hockey players (16–19 years old) have both FAI and labral tears, how many 20+ year old players are dealing with the same issues whether they are symptomatic or asymptomatic?”

“These bony changes are very common in

hockey players. It has been shown that 85% of hips in NHL hockey players showed some form of cam deformities (Larson et al. 2016).”

“According to a recent report from CBS Sports, five members of the Dallas Stars professional hockey team—including Jamie Benn, the league’s leading scorer last season—have undergone surgery for femoral acetabular impingement (FAI) in the last year.”

These sobering statistics seem to confirm that FAI is an acquired and progressive condition. I enjoyed the pain-free benefits of my hip injection for the next seven weeks. Although disappointed that the effects wore off sooner than expected, I took pleasure in the holiday season with low pain numbers and no appointments to keep as somebody’s patient.



## The Alchemy of Stem Cells

I rang in the New Year with relative stability in my hip, but by mid-February, I needed structural adjustments. For the next three months, I saw a conventional chiropractor I had used in my 20s and 30s who also did acupuncture for pain management. During that time, my friend Steve Silver told me about a colleague who had a pain clinic that did regenerative stem cell therapy. I made an appointment and had an interview to find

out about the treatment. It sounded pretty promising.

In mid-April, I underwent the first treatment. A pint of bone marrow was withdrawn from my hip bone and placed in a centrifuge that extracted 10ccs of stem cells that were injected into my hip joint to regrow some of the soft tissue that had eroded away. The joint felt thick and painful for three days, and walking was difficult; the pain went away gradually, and I began walking normally. I was instructed to lie low for two weeks then resume normal activities. Over the next three months, there was a feeling of a cushion developing in the joint, accompanied by an increased range of motion and less pain. Thank you, Dr. Silver.

In July, I underwent a second treatment, called PRP (platelet-rich plasma), that extracted stem cell platelets from my blood. In a similar process, a quantity of blood was extracted, put in a centrifuge, and reduced to the stem cell platelets, which were injected into my hip. This process was far less painful than the bone marrow extraction but yielded similar results. A final treatment in August injected a stem cell product that didn't come from my body called Bio-D. It produced a much more modest therapeutic effect.

The doctor who did my stem cell treatments outlined the possible outcomes by stating that 10% of people treated with stem cells got 100% relief from their condition; 10% got zero relief; and everyone else fell into a bell curve that ranged from 50% to 85% pain relief and about the same for restored function of the joint that was treated. I ended up in the curve at around 60%. I was grateful for the significant improvement in my pain and performance numbers and was told they could improve over the next few months.

### Rolfing My Way Back to China

In late July, I was out in Asheville, North Carolina, continuing my studies in Daoist

Neigong practices. This was a five-day retreat with only nine participants in an intimate mountain setting. There was always an interesting mix of people who came from all over the U.S. and Canada to learn the practices. One participant named Rob was a Rolfer by trade and also practiced Chinese martial arts. We hit it off, and being a body worker, he noticed the glitch in my gait as I walked. We struck up a conversation, and he explained in great detail how we think of the pelvis as a fixed bony structure, but in reality, all the bones in the pelvis actually move in small rhythmic patterns as we walk—or at least they should. He asked if I had ever done any Rolfing work.

Yes, I had done the 10 basic Rolfing sessions back in 2003 after a serious bicycling crash had me laid up for three months. The Rolfer I worked with had me back on my feet and

moving well after the sessions, spaced two weeks apart, were complete. The effects were long-lasting.

Rolfing, named after its founder, Dr. Ida Rolf, is a form of body work that works on the fascia, the complex of connective tissue that surrounds and supports all the muscles, bones, nerves, and organs, to create structural integration in the body. It's interactive for the patient and therapist rather than the patient being a passive recipient of the treatment, and the treatments can be painful.

Rob knew about a Rolfer in Minnesota who had worked with a lot of pro athletes, including some Minnesota Vikings. I knew about him because Hall of Famer Chris Carter once credited him with extending his career by years. I looked up his website and was disappointed to learn he had moved to Arizona. I contacted him anyway, looking for a referral in Minnesota. He said he could only recommend Kelly Ochis.

I began Rolfing sessions with Kelly in July and continued through February of 2019 and

*“I would like to live like a river flows, carried by the surprise of its own unfolding.”*  
— John Donohue

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occasionally thereafter. The sessions were deep and long-lasting and visibly changed my structure and my ability to move; my pain was reduced significantly as well.

There was talk at the retreat of another China trip in May of 2019. It would include a return to Hua Shan and Chaingbai Shan, Beijing, and Xian, but also travel into Southern China along the Li River and the picturesque mountains there. I wanted to go.

To prepare, I started working with a trainer named Troy, doing PT-type training targeted for my hips—strength, balance, and tissue work—to get ready. We worked together weekly from August 2018 through January of 2019. I felt good as the trip approached.

I knew I couldn't do all the hiking and climbing that would be required without a steroid injection. The first two weeks of the three-week trip would be the most difficult, especially Mt. Hua. I waited until three days before my departure to have the injection so it would be full strength during the trip. Dr. Johnson did the deed. As I lay on the table, a camera focused on my right hip showed my hip on a monitor in X-ray form. I noticed the head of my femur now had a dark, rough surface, as if a magnet had come too close to iron filings. I asked him about that. He said it was arthritis and that it was advanced; he then delivered my shot. I thanked him and headed for home to finish packing.

### Scaling Flower Mountain

The cities of Beijing and Xian are relatively flat; we were walking 9 or 10 miles a day there.



The Great Wall—an endless series of steep hills. We flew to the south and had a nice mix of smaller cities, bike rides, and a boat ride through the mountainous countryside. We still walked a lot but with more frequent rests. This was intentional to rest up for Hua Shan—Flower Mountain.

We flew to Hua Shan, and I took the tram to the top this time. It drops you off on the North Peak, the lowest of the four peaks. I had climbed all but the East Peak on my first trip, so I headed over there to see the famous Chess Pavilion, a place where Emperor Zhao Kuangyin played a chess match with the Daoist sage Chen Tuan for control of the mountain. The Emperor lost.

It was a breathtaking view and worth the climb. I headed over to South Peak, the

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A View of Hua Shan from  
Bei Do Ping

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The Chess Pavilion



highest peak, and to Golden Heaven Temple, where I would spend the night. On the way, I went to the West Peak to see it again, as I knew I would probably never be back. All four of the peaks are majestic in their own unique way, with an energy—a personality even—that I wanted to experience one last time.

I arrived at the Temple on South Peak late in the day, very tired but not completely spent. I had climbed about 12 miles of the “heavenly stairs,” and my hip still felt good. The next morning, we practiced Qigong at the temple, ate a simple breakfast made by the monks, and headed down the mountain to a monastery called Qingkeping, about two-thirds of the way down, where we would stay for the next two days.

I knew I couldn’t climb down. I did that descent in 2016, and it was brutal, so I hiked over to North Peak and took the tram down to the base of the mountain, grabbed a cab ride over to the village, and walked to the Jade Spring Temple, where the gateway to the trail up the mountain begins.

I hiked a third of the way up the mountain to Qingkeping. It was tiring but easier than the steep and dangerous descent. I had a peaceful two days at the monastery with lots of

Qigong, T’ai Chi, and meditation, simple vegetarian meals with food grown in the mountain gardens and prepared by the monks, and time with friends.

Finally, it was time to leave Hua Shan. A small group of my friends was going to hike up the mountain adjacent to Hua Shan called Bei Do Ping, where there was an 800-year-old Daoist monastery that had been abandoned and had deteriorated over time. There were five meditation caves up there that would still be used occasionally by meditators who knew where they were. I had lived in one for two days on my first trip and really wanted to experience the energy up there again; plus, there was a spectacular view of the mighty Hua Shan on one of the overlooks.

I decided to go with them, even though it meant climbing another mountain. It was about a two-hour hike since we were already at a high elevation. It was a meandering trail with a lot of switchbacks, making it an easier climb. Once there, I visited many of my sacred spots plus the caves.

The monk who had lived up there and managed the caves and trails was gone, so things were overgrown. We explored the compound then found the clearing to the flat rock ledge that faced Hua Shan and sat down to watch a magnificent cloud dance around its summit. There was deep beauty and solitude

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The brutal descent from the temple on South Peak, 2016

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Temple stairs, 2019





there, and I drank it all in. The words of the philosopher Lin Yutang came to mind: “If you can spend a perfectly useless afternoon in a perfectly useless manner, you have learned how to live.” I was sorry to leave, but the sun was signaling our departure. The trail down Bei Do Ping eventually merged with the hand-chipped granite stairs of Hua Shan as we made our final descent back to the village.

Somewhere near the end of the journey, I felt the last drops of the steroid in my hip get used up like a car that had just run out of gas. Fortunately, there wasn't far to go. Although I had gotten a full seven weeks of relief from my first shot, I was only granted two on this injection—but it was the two weeks I needed, as I had pounded my hips relentlessly for the past 14 days. The final week of the trip would be manageable, a plane, train, and bus rides to break up the walking. All of my therapies, training, and preparation made the end of the trip as magical as the rest.

### Living by Letting Go

For the remainder of 2019, I was maintaining the functional level in my hip I had gained through all the therapies and healing modalities I had done. I managed my pain with medical and spiritual Qigong and limited use of NSAIDs and CBD oil and monitored my progress or decline with how far and well I could walk and the quality of my T'ai Chi form. I was focused on the studio and how well my vision for it was being realized and planning the next phases of growth. Everything was in alignment and falling into place. The year 2020 was off to a good start.

Then the pandemic changed everything for everyone. Suddenly, the slate was wiped clean, all but for a single X marked in the middle and a scrawl beneath it that read “You are here.” Exactly where that was needed to be determined.

There was an outpouring of support from our community on every level that allowed us to survive and rebuild. I'm grateful beyond words to everyone. I wanted the studio to survive as a business but also as a place of



service. The way to begin was simply to move together, breathe together, be together in some way, even if, at first, there wasn't a way. All forms of chaos erupt from a place of stillness; finding a way back comes through the heart, insight, the will, and a connection to source, however one defines it. Mother Nature provided three seasons of beautiful weather to play in, and the rebuilding began.

As the world collectively went online, so did the studio, and so did my quest for more healing. I signed up for an online course called the FAI FIX, an intelligently designed program to help restore the full functioning of hips with FAI. About halfway into the program, I realized I was on a slow but real decline that this program couldn't help me overcome. My knowledge and skill level in my various martial arts was at a peak but unsupported by my hip. I was weary from the maximum effort and the minimum gains I was seeing in my pursuit of relief, and the constant “toothache” in my joint weighed like an anchor whenever I did anything physical. I let go of my

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Willow Tree Bends  
in the Wind

Photo by Andrew  
Wroble

long-standing resistance to a hip replacement and made an appointment with a surgeon.

Two people that I respect who are very active with their bodies and in their lives recommended the same surgeon to me. I researched his minimally invasive technique, his state-of-the-art prosthetic, and his experience: 4,500 hip replacements.

Dr. Heller and I started to look at the X-rays of my hip that had just been taken. I reflexively asked, "What causes FAI?" He interrupted and said that my hip was beyond the impingement phase and that all of the cartilage was worn off the head of the femur; I was sitting bone on bone, with osteoarthritis occupying the space where the cartilage once was. The X-ray provided a visual confirmation of this, and my hip felt like it looked.

I went home to think things over and meditate on my six-year journey. A wave of gratitude came over me for anyone and everyone who ever offered advice, a word of encouragement, or a referral; who gave me a ride, a place to stay; listened without judgment; funded a treatment; covered a class; conducted a ritual, a healing, a meditation; or just shared a laugh. I am especially grateful to my wife Mary, whose love, support, and patience gave me the space and time to do things as I did.

I called the surgeon's office to schedule my surgery. Three months out—something in the spring; April seemed about right—no snow removal or lawn care. They had an opening on April 22—Earth Day. That seemed perfect, and kind of poetic. I'm looking forward to beginning again.

