



12/22



Wudang

TEACHING THE ART, SCIENCE, AND SPIRIT OF T'AI CHI

From Sifu Paul

Greetings, everyone,

Winter is here. The snow has come, and with it, the chill of the season. The waning light is nature's way to invoke inactivity, introspection, and stillness. Often, however, we're never busier than we are at this time. Year-end to-dos, unrealistic expectations, and festive gatherings and holidays can ramp up our tension rather than relieve it. An extra helping of T'ai Chi and Qigong, or just a little more consistent practice, can help us balance things out and navigate more joyfully into the new year.

The past year at the studio was one of steady growth and rebuilding as things opened up more in 2022. We saw the return of partner practices, a steady influx of new students, the start of expanding our class offerings, and even a summer picnic. We look forward to sharing the art of T'ai Chi with all of you in the coming year.

Let It Snow

Winter in Minnesota is brisk and beautiful. But occasionally, the snow and ice make it unsafe for travel. In case of bad weather, any class cancellations will be posted three ways: (1) on our website's landing page as a red ribbon at the top of the page, (2) on our Facebook page, and/or (3) as an email sent to your inbox.

Holiday Closing

The studio will be closed for the holidays and cleaning from December 24 through January 1. We will open again on Monday, January 2.



Fundraiser Update

We did it! We hit our \$5,000 matching grant amount for our fall fundraiser.

Our annual fundraiser helps manage our monthly overhead of rent, insurance, salary, and taxes and also seeds studio projects, education, archival projects to preserve our legacy, technology upgrades, studio upgrades, and more.

There's still time for an end-of-the-year tax-deductible contribution; we're grateful for any amount. Our members and friends are our greatest assets. Thank you to everyone for your generous contributions and continued support of the studio.

When Eating Fruit, Remember Who Planted the Tree

This year at the studio, we celebrated our 29TH year in our current space, and I marked my 40TH year practicing T'ai Chi. Our Yang style lineage reaches back some 200 years, creating deep roots for what became our studio-school.

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Get studio news 3 ways:

1. website
2. Facebook
3. email

We couldn't operate at the level we do without the contributions and commitment of many of our members. They often work behind the scenes and rarely get the recognition they deserve. With a deep bow of gratitude, it's time to say thanks.

Our Board of Directors

The board makes important decisions on current studio issues, manages and balances our budget, and plans for our future.

This year, we say a fond farewell to three outstanding outgoing members of our board of directors: Ed Phillips, who served two-plus terms as secretary; Tom Hautman, who served two-plus terms as treasurer; and Morgan Willow, who served two terms as an at-large member. You did so much for the studio—you helped us through some difficult times and saw us rise back up again. Thank you.

We welcome Nancy Brown as our new secretary, Michael Morley as treasurer, and Fran Myers as an at-large member. Staying on are board president Stephen May and at-large members Libby Frost and Dave Sagisser. Thanks to you all.

The Studio Tutors

Our teaching staff of tutors has, collectively, more than 180 years of T'ai Chi experience between them. They are: LaVonne Bunt, Lynn Dennis, Tim Dennis, Tom Hautman, Kim Husband, Ralph Jerndal, Christopher Knutson, and Stephen May. The studio is lucky to have a group of teachers with this level of experience, ability, and dedication.

Other Contributors

Todd Nesser has developed our branding and does all our print, clothing, and online design. He designed and upgrades our website, films our practice videos, and helps problem-solve many of our tech issues.

Kim Husband, in addition to teaching, edits and designs our exceptional newsletter.

LaVonne Bunt, in addition to teaching, keeps the studio clean and beautiful. Her green

thumb keeps the plants happy and thriving.

Drew Johnson manages our shirt and clothing production and merchandising.

Lynn Dennis, in addition to teaching, acts as our office manager.

Tim Dennis, in addition to teaching, builds functional and beautiful objects from wood for the studio.

Stephen May, in addition to duties as tutor and board president, researched, tested, and purchased equipment upgrades for our online classes on Zoom.

Christopher Knutson expertly covers my classes live and on Zoom whenever I'm out of town.

Steve Silver provides us with ongoing support.

Our members: You're the reason the studio exists. I appreciate your presence and support more than I can say, and I root for your success—hoping you catch the T'ai Chi bug the way it caught me. It will never stop paying you back.



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Outgoing studio board members:

Ed Phillips

Tom Hautman

Morgan Willow

Contact Us

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

Email: mail@tctaichi.org

Website: tctaichi.org

Phone: 651.767.0267

All articles and other content written by Paul Abdella unless otherwise noted.

On Doing Things Wrong

By Stephen May

There may sometimes be more than one way to do something right and certainly even more ways to do something wrong. But has it occurred to you that sometimes, there may be a right way to do something wrong?

We have all missed a step on the stairs or knocked something over or used the wrong word. We hope no one noticed, and we go on our way as best we can. But when Chevy Chase does his signature pratfall at the opening of Saturday Night Live, when Charlie Chaplin turns around with a mop on his shoulder and clears off a shelf, when Mrs. Malaprop confidently states that “My affluence over my niece is not so great,” we know that these have been carefully calculated and rehearsed for our benefit. Rather than politely turn away and pretend not to notice, we laugh aloud and acknowledge the performer’s skill.

The same is true when there are multiple performers. When A throws a cream pie at B, who ducks just in time so that the pie hits C instead, everything has been carefully choreographed to flow smoothly. It may look like a free-for-all, but it is far from it. These “errors” rely on the awareness and participation of all. C must know where to stand to be in the line of fire, B must know when precisely to duck to make it look realistic, and A must know the moment when everything is in place for the throw, without a giveaway hesitation.

In instances like this, the partnership is equal. With a pair of ballroom dancers, we do not look for intentional mistakes at which to laugh, but the partners are still working together and have equal responsibilities. When one partner seems to sail gracefully through the air, it is actually both that make the illusion possible, and each may compensate when the other is having an off day so that both will look their best.

But sometimes, the partnership is actually unequal, and things become more interesting behind the scenes. A typical golf caddy may do little more than tote the bag of clubs



around the course, but at the professional level, the demands are much higher and are largely unnoticed by the spectators. For years, Tiger Woods engaged Steve Williams as a caddy (and you’ve probably never even heard of him). Besides carrying the clubs, Williams’s responsibilities included various supporting roles, one of which was to offer Woods an estimate of the distance to be covered on the next stroke. There was a period when Woods seemed a bit off his game, and Williams would intentionally give a wrong estimate as a tacit means of encouraging Woods to focus. Without this silent partner intentionally doing something wrong, Woods perhaps would not have been the same golfer.

In T’ai Chi, partners may be either equal or unequal. In san shou, the roles of attacker and defender change with almost every move. After you as defender have countered

The partner must know what posture comes next, how to set it up properly, and, perhaps most importantly, when to override years of T’ai Chi training and do something “wrong” for the learner’s benefit.

your partner's attack, you then make an attack for your partner to counter. Both sides are given egalitarian names, such as A and B, or "door" and "window" (the room reference in which you started). For the sake of convenience, the individual postures are usually identified by only one action (e.g., Big Roll Back or Hammer), but both partners are equal in importance.

In the Symmetries, however, one side is learning applications for the postures in the Solo Form, while the other is setting up those applications. Hence, one is called "T'ai Chi side" and the other is simply "partner side." Here, the sides are unequal, with favor implied to the T'ai Chi side, but I often consider the partner side to be the more challenging role. The partner must know what posture comes next, how to set it up properly, and, perhaps most importantly, when to override years of T'ai Chi training and do something "wrong" for the learner's benefit.

There are several good examples in the first Symmetry. After Ward Off Left, the partner needs to step to the side to set up Ward Off Right. This is supposed to be one-eighth of a circle around, so the partner must judge the



distance correctly to get the proper angle. The partner is also supposed to step on a line running through the learner's legs, where there is least support for rooting.

But lines are infinitely long. I can step squarely on that line but so far away that we will never

come into meaningful contact. Conversely (and this is the most common), I can step on the line but so close to my partner that they have no chance of forming a proper Ward Off shape for Ward Off Right. I need to learn to step on the line at a distance at which my partner can make an effective Ward Off in terms of both keeping me out and then issuing energy.

Because we do these forms cooperatively, there is also an unfortunate tendency to overcompensate, doing our partner's work for them.

Later, once my partner has learned what that Ward Off shape is and how to use it, then I can start stepping on the line a little too close or too far so that my partner can learn how to make that same effective shape with someone less cooperative or experienced. Stepping the "wrong" distance becomes a refinement.

When I move into that position to set up the first Ward Off Right, I must keep my rear heel off the floor so that I cannot so easily root myself. If I am rooted, then my partner will have little chance to issue energy and move me out. A more experienced player may be able to move me if I am rooted, but that is a more advanced level. With someone just learning, I need a "wrong" and unrooted stance.

When my partner is learning to issue energy against my push, I must remember to keep my arms rigid and tense. If from habit I let them release and collapse, my partner has no chance to learn how to issue energy. Normally, that release is the correct response to the energy I am receiving, but here, I need to be "wrong" and stay firm.

Because we do these forms cooperatively, there is also an unfortunate tendency to overcompensate, doing our partner's work for them, whether in san shou or the Symmetries. As the sequence becomes more familiar, we know

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We must first learn the rules so we can later learn when and why to break them.

what is coming next and unconsciously anticipate that next move. The end result may look the same, but the feeling is very different.

For instance, when I push in Upper Split and Push, I often feel my partner's arms pulling mine toward them instead of simply sticking and tracking my movement. My partner is doing my work: what happens if I start pushing more slowly than they are pulling me in? In turn, my partner's hands should be outside my shoulders at the end of my split, so some partners will preemptively push to the sides of my shoulders, and I really have nothing to split. Again, my partner is doing my work.

This is not being a good partner. And if I do these things as a training partner, I am doing something wrong for the wrong reasons, which will not help the person I am trying to teach.

As in so many things, being a good partner is not easy, which makes such a partner invaluable. It is easier to stay with just the Solo Form, going through the appropriate motions with only a vague idea of what lies behind them. But being a partner is an important stage in gaining a truly deeper understanding of T'ai Chi, giving clear lessons in both what not to do and why not to do it. And I am always grateful for those partners who are willing to teach me by doing something wrong.

New Daytime T'ai Chi Class Begins in January!

Wednesdays 12:30–1:45 p.m.

If you are learning the T'ai Chi Solo Form and have completed at least a six-week sequence of classes, come and continue to learn the Solo Form and progress toward its completion.

The class is also open to members who have completed the form and want to refine their fundamentals. The class will be taught by Lynn Dennis and Tim Dennis, studio veterans, each with 25 years of T'ai Chi experience.

For a full view of all our class offerings, go to our website at tctaichi.org.

Shake Well and Live Well

I was at the tail end of a 13-hour flight from Los Angeles to Beijing when the pilot finally announced that he was preparing to land the airplane. I had slept intermittently, but not deeply, on the long flight to China. This was the first time I had visited the country whose culture I had spent so much time learning about and whose martial arts I had spent so many years practicing. The bus ride to our hotel revealed the expanse and enormity of the city and also a stroke of good fortune—a clear and smog-free blue sky surrounding the early-morning August sun.

We checked our luggage in the hotel, had a light breakfast, and proceeded to take the 15-minute walk over to Temple of Heaven park. The Temple of Heaven is a famous complex of imperial religious buildings constructed in the early 15TH century. Its impressive architecture, landscape design, and rich history made it a popular tourist attraction. It would be our second destination after our morning Qigong



in the vast park that surrounds the Temple of Heaven. Temple of Heaven park is a flat expanse of open and wooded nature encompassing an impressive 660 acres.

We entered the park through the east gate and walked toward a favorite Qigong spot of our trip leader, Michael Winn, about a mile away.

On my way there, I passed an artist painting with water and an extended brush on the dust-covered sidewalk, only to have his creation disappear in the hot sun a few minutes later. Parents and grandparents brought children to play; a young couple played music on traditional Chinese instruments; two women, masked against air pollution, practiced ballroom dancing together.

We approached an area with exercise apparatus that, at first glance, looked much like the children's playground equipment found here. We stopped and watched some shirtless men, whom I guessed to be in their 50s and 60s, impressively performing gymnastics on a high bar and parallel bars. As we moved deeper into the park, we began to see martial artists practicing T'ai Chi, Pa Kua, Push-Hands, weapons, and other styles.



Various forms of Qigong were being practiced in small groups here and there, including a group doing the practice known as Shake the Tree, the simple vigorous shaking of the body to release tension, open the joints, and vibrate the bones, muscles, and fascia in the body to stimulate Qi flow and blood circulation.

Soon, we found our spot, did some quick stretches, and began a shaking practice



ourselves. This practice is well known in China and is one of the simplest forms of Qigong. The Chinese understand that creating a relaxed vibration in the body helps the circulatory system. Adding deep breathing or a sound/toning practice creates even more vibration and helps increase blood oxygen levels. Sending a vibration into the bones stimulates bone growth and helps to strengthen them.

In his book *Mindful Exercise*, Dr. Peter Gryffin describes an experiment that seems to validate the efficacy of shaking the body for health:

The second incident that further prompted my realization that Chi or oxygen-based exercises may be considerably more involved than just blood pumping through the cardiovascular system came from an article I read in the *Los Angeles Times* over 15 years ago. The article detailed the use of a vibrating machine by researchers at the rehabilitation institute of Michigan to enhance circulation, increase bone density, and reduce muscle spasms. Quadriplegics, being bedridden, often suffer from bedsores and poor blood circulation, need to be turned, massaged, and manipulated on a regular basis. This is another clue that movement is a necessary requirement for proper blood and oxygen circulation. To prevent the problems associated with being bedrid-

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Water painter in Temple of Heaven Park, Beijing

Photo by Paul Abdella, 2016

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Sword practitioner in Temple of Heaven Park, Beijing

Photo by Paul Abdella, 2016

den, the researchers placed the patients on a large platform that would vibrate and shake up the body, similar to the way a can of paint is shaken in a paint mixer at a hardware store.

The idea was that the vibrations would distribute blood and oxygen throughout all of the cells and capillaries in the body, similar to the way color is distributed throughout a can of paint. And it worked, with some surprising results. Not only did the treatment help eliminate bedsores and poor circulation, but the patients reported what had previously been considered an impossibility—feelings in the extremities of their arms and legs, an indication of nerve re-growth. This study indicated to me that enhanced blood diffusion can result in significant health gains.

The vibrating machine has a parallel in various Chinese health exercises, forms of qigong that involve shaking the body. Many qigong exercises are based on

“vibrating” the body through various exercises. As a preliminary to tai chi, one common exercise is to vibrate the body through a variety of methods, such as shaking the body up and down very rapidly, or rising up on the toes and then dropping the body so that it jiggles or vibrates. As the body is vibrated, a tingling is felt in the fingers, hands, and arms, and sometimes throughout the body, which is seen as enhanced qi flow. This tingling is also felt during tai chi and various qigong practices. Thinking about this brought me to the realization that slow movements of the body in exercises such as tai chi and qigong maybe a health exercise as important in its own right as aerobics and strength conditioning.

Adding a simple shaking Qigong practice before your T'ai Chi practice can quicken the stimulation and circulation of oxygen-rich blood that the longer practice of the Solo Form will then prolong. It's also a wonderful practice on its own.

