

T'ai Chi: This martial art teaches one student to fight a family legacy.

I inherited osteoarthritis from my mother's side of the family. She came from a long line of women with crab claws attached to their wrists, and I never realized how painful it was until I developed it at the age of 30. I was waking up at night from the pain, and with the knowledge that my mother's hands looked horrible by age 45, I asked my doctor if there was anything I could do. She recommended ibuprofen and a glucosamine/chondroitin supplement, but suggested there was nothing I could do to stop the disease's progression.

When not even painkillers kept me from waking at night, a friend said I should try t'ai chi with her teacher, who taught it a special way. I thought, sure. T'ai chi, from what I saw in arthritis commercials, looked so easy. A yawn-inspiring exercise in hand waving, right? Wrong. How very wrong.

Sifu Gregory Fong's Yang class starts with a warm up of joint-loosening movements. He asks new students how healthy they've been lately. Depending on the answers, the class quickly advances into heart-pumping, sweat-inducing cardio, and then, when everyone is tired, stretched, and ready to move in the most fluid way possible, they do the slow, careful movements of the hundred-year-old Yang form.

I learned how to strengthen my hands by extending them in a curved position. In winter, I twirled my wrists and played invisible piano whenever I could. I extended my head up on my neck, finally standing up straight after all these years, so my energy and blood flow had the easiest path to my brain. I relaxed my shoulders so the energy could flow to my fingertips. I increased my circulation not just by increasing my heart rate but by activating the neurons in, and leading to, my extremities, and that winter my feet and hands were not so cold. I worked areas of my body most people don't think about.

I nearly quit a few times. But I couldn't. Because I had learned that going to the gym to run on a treadmill three times a week isn't really exercise. I learned that desk jobs, poor posture, and lack of use are the reasons most people to move their most important muscles inefficiently, and that increasing disuse compounds the problem. T'ai

chi helps the practitioner discover, and then work, the tissues surrounding the joints, hearts, lungs, and other organs for maximum energy and health. Throughout the classes, Sifu Fong explains how each movement stimulates the nervous system and works vital areas that most workouts ignore.

Slowly, the changes became not only noticeable in terms of pain reduction, stamina, strength, and agility, but they were visible as well. My ankles and wrists got thicker. And my hands started to look muscular. I have increased my lung capacity, which has helped me with an affliction I've had since the age of 13—asthma. My breathing has become so much better that I no longer bring my inhaler with me everywhere, and I often can't remember where it is.

Doctor: How often do you use your inhaler these days?

Me: I don't know.

Doctor: Says here (reading file) you use it almost every day.

Me: Not anymore.

Doctor: Let me take your pulse. Wait. (Her hand was on my foot as she was checking my file.) I can feel it through your sock. Wow.

Strength- and energy-building exercises and the goal of uniting body with mind are the dual foundations of the training. That's where the practice of standing meditation comes in. To an outsider, it's a room of people just standing still. However, by visualizing our bodies moving in no fewer than six directions, the students perform a type of isometric exercise that is, for the most part, invisible. But not comfortable. Perhaps that's why it is so easy for beginners to get discouraged. Change comes slowly and might be difficult to detect, so perseverance and patience pay off. This mental component unites visualization, feeling, and movement—demanding the most of one's concentration.

The standard stance stretches the tendons and increases blood flow. It's like sitting in a chair, knees open, without the chair. The hands and feet should be active, but this concept is difficult for people who are used to doing things to extremes. The hands are neither flexed nor limp. They are holding an invisible basketball. The stances I do, different than the ones most of the rest of the class does, are meant for my condition. I bend my hands back at the wrists so my fingers are pointing to my elbows. After 10 minutes, my hands are hot, and they are purple with blood.

The first few months in class were difficult. I thought I'd never understand what to do, let alone be able to do anything right. My legs shook, sweat poured down my head. Sifu Fong said these first stances I did were easy. I laughed. I thought, if I can just learn enough to get through one class without struggling, without my chest tightening when I try to keep my neck straight, if I can learn to not push my hips back when I stand lower, to keep my back straight, I will be happy. I learn that like most people, I have been slumping my back every day for the past 30 or more years. My head pushes forward on my neck, kinking my spine. My hips push forward, stressing my knees.

As the months passed, I wasn't struggling as much. It was still hard, but not torture. That's when it got harder, and I discovered there is no "mastering" anything in this class. Because as soon as one starts getting comfortable, it's time to change. Sifu Fong told me to make my stances lower. He showed me how to do the one-legged stances. And once again, I was a beginner, not even able to keep my back straight. Every class is harder than the day before. Frustrating? Not any more. I have transformed my body, and every day I am learning new ways to do it.

My frustration at the beginning highlights one of the mental aspects of t'ai chi: the knowledge of one's one body and how far it can be pushed. I had always thought that I had a good work ethic, but I really didn't expect this class to be so hard. So I wanted to quit. If it hadn't been for my health, I probably would have. This class has taught me how natural it is to avoid difficult activities, and this tendency gets greater with habit. By making me practice the difficult every day, it has trained me to seek out and embrace complex concepts and activities—which can all begin by trying them for a single second. I have found out that the body has a better memory for some things than the mind does, and that it is only through practice that it can remember.

In my office—which is full of mostly desk workers—I am known as the strong one, even though I am far from the youngest. When boxes need to be lifted, my co-workers call for me. They ask how I can lift so much. I show them the push-ups from class, the ones I thought I'd never be able to do. "Get on your knuckles," Sifu Fong had said. And I couldn't, it was just too much. But I started with one, and I lasted that way for one second. Second by second, I increased my time, I learned to keep my back flat all the

way to my feet, and one day someone in class said to me, “You’ve gotten good at that.” That’s how I learned how to do something you thought you couldn’t do.

One day, Sifu Fong asked me to show a young man barely in his 20’s how to do an exercise that starts on the hands and knees and pushes forward flat to the floor with hands stretched forward on a cloth, using the stomach muscles to pull the body back to the starting position. This young man couldn’t do more than one. “Do what you can,” I urged. “You can work up to it.” Unfortunately, he never came back.

Friends and relatives invited me to their t’ai chi classes. There was music. There was an emphasis on learning the movements of the form. The standing meditation was really just meditation on two legs. What I found missing was an awareness of basic posture. Relaxation is the focus of these classes. The students are mostly slumped with young hunchbacks; they do not have the physical structure to hold themselves upright. Their heads hang. They flex their chest muscles and their shoulders have migrated up over the years toward their ears. They are doing what Sifu Fong calls easy t’ai chi.

Fong’s approach is first things first. If the basics aren’t there, the more advanced concepts aren’t worth learning, because there is nothing to base them on. So we spend much of each class reviewing the basics. Head. Shoulders. Back. Hips. Knees. And as we do this, we realize that we need to review the basics at all times. It took me three years to turn the corner, but when it happened, it happened fast. Now that my arthritis is no longer painful, I can appreciate the mental aspects of t’ai chi. I can concentrate better. I have more energy. My reaction time has improved.

My doctor has retired, and I haven’t had a reason to see another since. Next time I do, I intend to bring up a little surprise about arthritis.

I am fortunate to have found this teacher who has taught me there is no magic pill, that the hard work never ends, and that any sort of faith in getting better must be followed up by action. It’s a responsibility for me to know my body better than any doctor, and an additional responsibility to know it better than my teacher.