

A man in a black t-shirt is performing a Tai Chi warm-up move. He is standing in a room with a wooden handrail. The background is a light-colored wall. The man is in a dynamic pose, with his right arm extended forward and his left arm bent at the elbow. The image has a halftone or dithered texture.

# My life with tai chi

Phil East

I first started learning tai chi and qigong in 1987 whilst in my late teens. After failing to get the "A" level grades needed for university and whilst my friends moved away, I was struggling with depression. Tai chi (and later qigong) helped me through this period of my life

Phil East, demonstrating warm ups





A few years later I was able to access Warwick University as a mature student and studied psychology and sociology. This eventually led me to a 16-year career in mental health. During this time, I continued to learn qigong and, following a supervision session with my occupational therapy manager, began to deliver sessions to our client groups in a hospital setting. When I moved to Wales in 2007, I continued to offer classes for the charities I worked for.

In 2020 I left my career in mental health. I set up the Three Deep Breaths School Of Qigong and as we entered the first lockdown I began to grow my business, on Zoom and then in community settings in Conwy County.

While visiting relatives in Canada I attended a tai chi Class in Oakville, Ontario. One of the enduring aspects of this class was that they stopped halfway through to share a cup of tea and chat.

After Covid, as my classes developed in the community, I built on my experiences of working in mental health. I realised that a core component of a good qigong class is the connections we develop between our teachers and students. Most of my classes now include the opportunity for this social connection. To sit and talk. To listen and be heard. To slow down and observe.

## Weaving the web

In 2023 all these strands began to weave together. I met with several people I had supported in my past career. They mentioned the decline in local support for their mental health and the feelings of isolation and difficulty moving forward after Covid. I met with a new, local

charity in Llandudno, and reached out to contacts I had worked with in the past. They were all keen to assist in a new event. The final thread was seeing that the Tai Chi and Qigong Union had a fund (the Gerda Geddes Fund) that might support this event. Applying for the funding was simple and the TCUGB were very supportive, before and after the application.

The organisations attending the event:

- Wellness and Walking Holidays: offering local wellbeing breaks.
- Adferiad: supporting mental health and substance misuse.
- Conwy Community Wellbeing Team: providing activities in the local area.
- Teuluoedd Canolog Conwy Family Central: facilitating information and support for families in Conwy.
- Infinity Cymru: free counselling services.
- Artlysparklydesigns: upcycling materials into arts and crafts.

## The event

We started with a brief introduction from each of the organisations about what they could offer. The organisations were set up in a separate room where people could go and chat and find out about the services available.

In the main hall, Three Deep Breaths School of Qigong offered a session focussing on Wudang Mountain qigong and shibashi set 1. I had learned the Wudang Mountain set when I visited Australia in 1996. At the time I wasn't



Introduction



particularly impressed; it seemed too simple after the Cheng Man Ching Form. However, since then, it has become invaluable to many people due to its simplicity. Firstly, in 2019 when I was going through depression, anxiety, panic attacks and paranoia, Wudang Mountain with its emphasis on 'letting go' was my daily qigong practice. Then, during the first lockdown, I shared it on Zoom and many people reported it was helping them with the fear surrounding the pandemic.

The shibashi set 1 is my 'go to' for beginners and for taster sessions. During my career in mental health I found it to be extremely useful for anxiety and stress. Like Wudang Mountain, the simple, repetitive movements are easy to follow and it can be offered as a seated practice, making it accessible to all.

This session was followed by a refreshment break, an opportunity to chat and mingle, before a second session of qigong. Some people engaged in both sessions, whilst new people joined for the first time.

In this second class, I offered Wudang Mountain and the nine forms, which I learnt while studying shiatsu at the Shiatsu College in Manchester. My understanding is that this form is taught to therapists in China to prevent burn-out. I thought it would be particularly helpful for the employees of the organisations attending our event. Between 2016 and 2019, both financial resources and staffing levels in local mental health services were reduced. During this particularly stressful period of my career, I was practising the nine forms on almost a daily basis. I feel that combining Wudang Mountain qigong with the nine forms is a great way to leave behind the stress of work, thus allowing for a restful sleep.

## Conclusion

Three Deep Breaths School of Qigong would like to say, 'thank you' to all those that made this memorable event



possible. It was an opportunity to introduce qigong to a wider audience; to demonstrate its potential benefits; to showcase the valuable work of charities, statutory services and private businesses, and the need for community events to bring people together. None of this would have been possible without the TCUGB Gerda Geddes Award. 🇬🇧



## Feedback

"As a charity providing help and support for people with mental health, substance use, addiction and other complex needs, it was a pleasure to be involved in this event. At Adferiad, as part of the holistic approach that we take in supporting people, focussing on a client's health and well-being is a key part of their recovery. By learning and understanding more about the benefits of qigong we have been able to promote and share this with our clients and encouraging them to take part has been really valuable and something we hope that we can develop further in the future."

"Thank you for inviting us (Conwy Community Wellbeing team) along, it was a great morning and very beneficial as we spoke to a number of people on the day, including connecting two ladies with a local singing group that they were both keen to join. I was also able to book a gentleman on one of our own art sessions and I gave another lady information about some Dance for Parkinson's sessions running locally for her mum. I spoke with around 14 people – who all took copies of our various community timetables."

"Thank you so much for arranging such an interesting day. Well organised, warm welcome. Wish, I'd invited some friends to come along too. Anyway, I handed out some leaflets, so they might want to attend one of your classes, which are so much in demand."