

COMPLEXITY WRAPPED IN SIMPLICITY:

WATER TIGER'S *T'ai Chi Qigong Breathing Set*

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It is not very often that I address the origins of Water Tiger's *T'ai Chi Qigong Breathing Set*. There is a short explanation in the set's written instructions and I often make mention of the story when we play the time-expanded, i.e., slowed down, version of the set on the mat and in the room. My instructor, Sifu R. Mesmer of Black Dragon School of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, had a similar set that we played during his studio classes in Vermillion, SD; and, it was the foundation of our set. Using Mesmer Sifu's set as a model, I reordered and added postures from the Primary and Coiling Sets of *T'ai Chi Qigong*. I honestly no longer have a memory of the Black Dragon set. I haven't played it since the early 90s.

Regardless, our *10-Piece T'ai Chi Qigong Set* has become an integral part of our lineage. Not only is it played on a regular basis at the end of our regular studio classes, it also appears at the end of most every class in both of the ongoing, studio-style classes I facilitate at Sachem and West Babylon libraries. Depending upon the course curricula for other public class programs, sometimes it is the sole focus and other times, when possible, it is played at the end of each class in a short-term public session. Over the 21 years of *T'ai Chi in the Park*, there was nary a weekly gathering that didn't close with the set.

If someone asks why we play the set to close our classes, etc., I usually give a simple, two-fold answer. The first fold is that it serves as a bit of a palate cleanser and the second fold is that offers a group experience that is a little bit easier around which to get mind and body wrapped. For the former, it's a nice way to tune into the body and the breath while clearing the mind of any challenges — or victories — we've experienced in class. It prepares us to carry a sense of calm relaxation into whatever our day — or evening — brings us next. For the latter, many times our play on the mat and in the room is mostly solo or in smaller groups and playing the set at the end of a given class helps to build a fuller sense of community, of shared experience. And, given, the lower body is externally still, it's easier to gain ownership of the set and cultivate an understanding of the movements and the intent underneath them.

There is, of course, more to the set than this — much more.

Let's start with the foundation: *Ma Bu*, aka Horse Stance and what I call "Vertical Alignment 101". Our shoulder-width stance is where everything starts for things Water Tiger. As I have said on the mat and in the room, I find those that stand in *Ma Bu* — instead of some other casual pose — as a default during class are the ones that are more likely to maintain a consistently correct width during floor exercises and form play. Others are likely to have one "shoulder-width" for meditation, another for the *Breathing Set*, and yet another for fore-stance. Shoulder-wide is shoulder-wide. Period. The *Breathing Set* presents the opportunity to build that particular — and foundational — awareness.

Once the external movement in the upper body begins with the second posture, *Expand the Chest to Cleanse the Body*, until it ends at the final "moment of stillness" before closing the set, there should be constant, consistent movement, i.e., the set should have an even flow with no stops. Up should become down just as down becomes up. Expansion should become retraction just as retraction becomes expansion. All this should be accomplished at one, steady tempo.

One of the guiding principles of Water Tiger's T'ai Chi Ch'uan is the back should remain rounded and the chest sunken. This is often combined with maintaining an opening under the arms. The *Breathing Set* offers us the opportunity to explore keeping these three physical necessities intact with fewer attention draws than there would be in playing a floor exercise or form. We should allow these three guides to tell us before we extend too far or contract too close in such postures as — but not limited to — *Turn Heaven and Earth in Front of the Body* and *Left, Right to Push the Mountains*.

Wrapped into the three is a fourth: keeping the elbows and the shoulders dropped. This is true even though it is obvious the elbows and shoulders have to rise while playing such postures as the previously mentioned *Heaven and Earth*, as well as *Living Buddha Holds Up the Heavens*. The rising elbows should have an anchored feeling. The shoulders should be conduits allowing for and supporting an upward extension; they should not lead it.

Chest, back, open arms, elbows, and shoulders are all only part of what can be wrapped up in the skills I refer to as our "ten dollar words": *proprioception* and *kinesthesia*. They are — more or less — the awareness of the body in space and the awareness of the body in movement. In other words, we have to develop a sense of knowing where every part of the body is — even when we can't see them. The opportunities to hone this sense abound in the *Breathing Set*. From properly identifying the palms are leading in *Expand the Chest* and *Pour Qi through the Baihui* to maintaining the alignment of the *Lao Gong* points — to one another and to your own center line — in *Turn Heaven and Earth*, each posture involves some level of this awareness. You should be able to identify and, eventually, meet the challenges established by each of the ten.

I say it often: "Everything's connected." I might refer to BK Loren's book, *The Way of the River*, and her observation: "After a few months, I could not move my hands without feeling it in the soles of my feet." Or, perhaps, Damo Mitchell's online essay, *Sung and Energetic Relaxation in Qigong*, and his detail of the tissues of the body connecting like a "biological wetsuit". We should be able to engage our awareness while we play the set to explore how our upper body movement creates changes, adaptations, micro-movements, throughout the externally stationary lower body.

And, oh yes: breathing. Water Tiger's *10-Piece T'ai Chi Qigong Breathing Set* affords us the opportunity to link the breath to the movement and the movement to the breath. Without one, there would not be the other; and, vice versa.

So, there you have it: a palate cleanser that's a meal on its own.



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