

REALISING TAOIST PHILOSOPHY IN LOCKDOWN

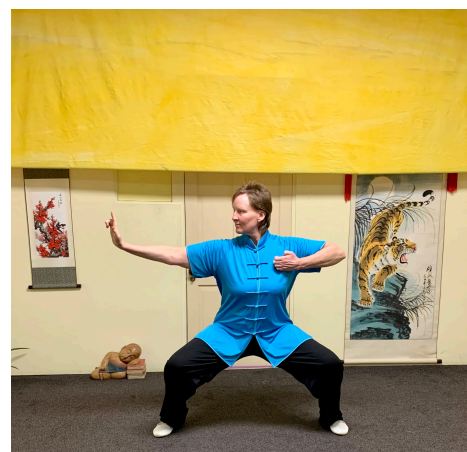
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When first thinking about what to write in an article about the experience of Lockdown, my mind went through all the feelings, emotions, ups & downs, highs & lows possible during this unprecedented time in our living memory. I'm sure we've all been there, observed, heard others points of view, experiences learned & imagined, seemingly chaotic at times, sad, tragic, sensationalist, especially in the media & on social media which can be our salvation, distraction or undoing all in the same day.

Overall, I have felt immensely blessed to have this 'secret' or 'gift' of our Tai Chi & Qigong practices, the philosophy it is based upon & the richness of the experiences of my solo practice, shared information & teachings of the whole community of friends, colleagues, students, teachers the world over, not forgetting the ancestors whose teachings have been captured in books, talked about on the internet & in our minds, passed down through the ages from teacher to student and realised within our practice.

Like many instructors, I never thought I'd be giving virtual classes, although I found myself learning the new technical skills required to set up Zoom Classes & Workshops that have been so beneficial over these months. They have given us all a 'taste of normal', of social interaction where we can see each other, where students can simply wave at each other (especially important in the initial weeks/months of physical isolation) not to mention the class content. This in itself was a great example of one of the biggest lessons in Tai Chi/Qigong - **Go with the Flow** - working around obstacles - as Bruce Lee so famously said 'Be like water, my friend!'



Many thanks must go to Masters Faye & Tary Yip of Deyin Taijiquan Institute & British Health Qigong Association for leading the Zoom way, showing us the possibilities with their Online Qigong Festival, Workshops & Lectures at this time, which initiated many of us to the Zoom way.

For me personally, this has been a time of taking stock, re-evaluating my life, choices, what's important, necessary or not. Spending time with family, chatting, keeping in touch, sharing experiences & information, listening, being outdoors in nature & daily walks. Also it was good to catch up on the accounts, decorating, spring cleaning & decluttering. And of course my practice! Getting back to what I feel like practicing or what I need rather than what I need to teach, sometimes two different things, especially having had a knee operation this year. On Zoom, I've been teaching simple Tai Chi Qigong, Alignments, Breathing, Daoyin Warm Ups, Tai Chi Principles & Drills for 24 Forms & Health Qigong Ba Duan Jin in my regular weekly classes & Health Qigong Taiji Yang Sheng Zhang or Health Preservation Stick Exercises as a Workshop every other Saturday morning which is ongoing & attracting those from further afield, including all over the UK & abroad.



Another Qigong lesson that is always apparent - **Balancing Yin & Yang**. Or putting things into perspective as I've often realised 'Perspective is everything!' Our practice is many things to many people, an exercise regime, flexibility training, wellbeing program, self development, learning something new & interesting, a social gathering, philosophy or lifestyle. It is a time to reconnect with ourself, get out of our heads, bring our mind back into our body, to calm & focus our mind, relax our body, let go of stress & tension.....Balance our Qi! Our practice teaches awareness & mindfulness, how to appreciate things like walking in nature, observing animals & birds, absorbing the fresh Qi, also known as the therapy 'Forest bathing' in Japan! To move, exercise, improve circulation of Qi & Blood, boost our immune system. Breathe well to stimulate Lung Qi/function/muscles/diaphragm, therefore increasing Oxygen in the bloodstream & increasing circulation. To 'Be' or find centre & stillness. To align & improve our posture, especially when we are spending more & more time staring at the screens of our mobile phones, tablets, computers and tv. Who would have thought there's so much going on from simply practicing some slow relaxed flowing movements!

What if we were given this time to use as a reset? How to improve ourself, our life, for more enjoyment, health, wellbeing, more compassion, a simpler more sustainable future. I hope so!

I've been reading Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching regularly & this week Verse 16 has resonated with me. I particularly enjoy this translation by Stephen Mitchell & it is a small companion for when I travel. It was recommended by my Tai Chi sister who lives in Thailand, so has a fond place in my heart.

16.

Empty your mind of all thoughts.
Let your heart be at peace.
Watch the turmoil of beings,
but contemplate their return.

Each separate being in the universe
returns to the common source.
Returning to the source is serenity.

If you don't realise the source,
you stumble in confusion and sorrow.
When you realise where you come from,
you naturally become tolerant,
disinterested, amused,
kind-hearted as a grandmother,
dignified as a king.
Immersed in the wonder of the Tao,
you can deal with whatever life brings you,
and when death comes, you are ready.



Lockdown Thoughts & Experiences by Tai Chi & Qigong Students

During the early part of our Lockdown during the Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020, I asked my students if they'd like to share some thoughts of their own experiences. Here are some words kindly shared for which I thank the originators. I've kept them anonymous to save any embarrassment although there's no reason for it. We each have our own feelings & thoughts & none are right or wrong, they simply are..... I think it will be important to share these to look back on in the future. What is apparent is that throughout this trying times, our practices have supported us well.

"I have thoroughly enjoyed your Zoom classes. During this very weird time it has been great to have to focus on new moves and to see you. I have found I maybe have concentrated more (except when my husband was lurking waiting to do something!!) Zoom has been a wonderful alternative but will never replace our class and our friends there. You have done a great job of making us feel part of something which has been lovely. Thank you. I have found it very frustrating being over 70 and not able to do anything to help anybody. Obviously have missed the family and grandchildren hugely. Upside has been spending quality time with my husband. His memory loss is ongoing and sometimes in normal life I feel I neglect him. Also less cooking for family and no entertaining!"

"The zoom classes have been wonderful. Even though you are tiny on my phone your instructions are so clear it has made learning these lovely Daoyin warm ups really easy. I so look forward to Thursday mornings and feel a real sense of connection with you, The Chi Clinic, and everyone else in the class. The few minutes when we are all connected are really enjoyable. I enjoy being taught online and feel particularly relaxed and receptive in my own home. I really don't think the experience could be improved."

"Lockdown has been such a strange experience. My life hasn't really changed much as we are both still working, but I know my freedom has been curtailed and sometimes this is frustrating. Also, the experience of actually leaving home has changed. Less traffic and fewer people around lead to a feeling of unreality. Face masks and social distancing add to the hostility which is instigated by fear. Peculiar reactions in the most unexpected situations are so disconcerting. Regular Qigong training and practice has a grounding effect and I'm sure I carry less physical tension as a result."

"Personally, I have found that my anxiety has been less of a problem during lockdown even though Covid brings anxieties of its own. I'm not sure I'd survive the fear of the illness if diagnosed, never mind the physical effects (and I'm not joking about this). The quiet of the early weeks of lockdown was a real break from the everyday stresses of life, seeing wildlife flourish in the absence of so much human activity, bluer skies, noticeably cleaner air, lack of air traffic and human noise was wonderful. It's sad to see so many dead animals at the side of the roads as traffic begins to increase again. Thank you Vicky, for your hard work in presenting the zoom classes and for giving me this opportunity to really think about what the last few months has meant to me."

"Thank you for the music. I practice in my local park in the morning when I get up, I don't have a mobile phone or an internet connection on my iPad so I can't put on any background music whilst there. I can now, with the files you have sent, the birds seemed to love it also. I swear they were singing along with the music this morning. I have been practicing Ba Duan Jin in the park, firstly because when CV19 was at its peak in China I saw it being taught to the patients in a hospital in Wuhan. I checked with my teachers and asked for your opinions. You all said very similar things about its benefits, so I thought by practicing it in the park more people may become aware of Qigong or even go home and mimic some of the movements in their own practice. I have shared the whole form with quite a few people now & passed it on to some people recovering from Covid."

"I am really enjoying the classes. I think you pace them well and I like the fact that you focus on a small area each time. Although I miss the face to face classes (and I really want to get to know Beijing 24!), I would definitely be interested in continuing with an online class when we go back to normality. In an ideal world, I would come to your Tuesday night class and do an on-line one, later in the week.. Just a thought.... I also really like paying up front for the month and then decide which classes I attend. You are doing a great job. I very much appreciate it. And like I said, I am looking forward to seeing everyone in person again - even though I don't know most of them!"

"Lovely to hear from you. I really do enjoy the Online classes. It is not as good as the real thing but it does give some structure to my week. It has taken me quite a few weeks to feel comfortable connecting on Zoom, each week does become better!!! As you know, I am not a techie!!!!. The reception and clarity is good. I enjoy both classes, especially Thursday as the movements are fairly new and it is good to attempt something different. It must be quite difficult for you to teach a class with varying degrees of ability. I would however quite like to vary Tuesday, say with some Yi Jin Jing, as it would give a bit of variety. I can appreciate that this may not always be easy as other folk may not feel the same as I do. Whatever we do, it really helps and always gives me the incentive to practice in the week which is something I have to admit that I did not always do before lockdown. I definitely feel much better by doing more practice, so much so that I can nearly touch my toes!!! Whatever you do is great by me!!! Just so grateful to see you on the screen. So looking forward to the day when we can all be together again. Reflecting on this mornings class I realised what is good for me is the warm up, Opening Gates and most of all the Tai Chi Qigong 18 Forms - ShiBaShi. This is very powerful in focusing and relaxing. The balance of time spent with this is ideal giving us enough time for Ba Duan Jin or 8 Treasures but really focusing on the Tai Chi Qigong. Yesterday I mentioned Yi Jin Jing. On reflection I feel the benefits of ShiBaShi are greater and perhaps we can do another couple of those moves if time permits. However whatever you do is good by me!"

"I am loving the zoom classes, it is possibly one of the most important things that has kept my mental health and wellbeing so well during this lockdown. Having been unable to join you in lessons apart from monthly workshops, due to living too far away from you, I have gained so much from these weekly classes. I have loved learning so much more, I have felt myself slow down, calm down and go more inside. I have practised about 5/6 days a week and I can't tell you how much benefit I have gained from this practice. I cannot thank you enough. You are an amazing teacher, I love your humour, your clear teaching methods and how you explain so much. I learn so much from you. Thank you."

"Thank you for the music (no Abba reference intended). I think it's a great idea to compile an article about lockdown experiences. I know that for me its been great to feel connected to the group (albeit without sound) and it has been a source of great comfort to know I am not the only one out there. Practice is something I feel the need for everyday, as it strengthens and calms and channels my thoughts and stops me spinning out of control. It has been hard without my late husband, because he was my sounding board and I really miss his silly jokes which always put everything back into perspective. Tai Chi and Qigong helps to keep me sane and grounded."

"The music is heavenly, thank you; I just shut my eyes and do whatever I feel like which is usually a mixture of everything I have ever done in your classes! During the Zoom meetings I could not really hear it so I shall make sure I have the volume turned up! Zoom classes are obviously a different experience but I do find it easier to switch off from the outside world and live in my own little bubble for a while. On the other hand I miss the social aspect and find it difficult to chat on Zoom as it is not spontaneous and everyone waits for someone else to say something! It is helpful when you face side on to the camera (an angle I do not normally get from where I usually stand in class) so that we can see exactly where and how we should be positioning hands etc. and I think the pace of the class is good and repetition of forms very useful as I am not always concentrating

the first time round! Thank you very much for the meetings and I hope you and Tony are both well.”

“Thank you for your e-mail. That music is lovely. I really love that. For the Zoom Classes. I do not know how I can survive the lock down without them. I do exercise every day, but it is really different to do work out with the other people. It is very nice to be able to do in my own place. Not worry about what to wear (well almost), not worry about driving (I hate it). But at the same time I really miss the atmosphere of the class. And sometimes it is a bit difficult to concentrate in my own living room. There are lot of noise from outside, delivery man knocking on the door during the class and so on. Hope things will be getting better soon and we can all come back to your place for the classes. The lock down seems to have a lot of effects on many people. There is an increased divorce rate in Japan. Especially, wives are still thought to be the main workers in the household, even they have the jobs outside of the home. Imagine that you have to keep feeding two kids and husband three times a day. Lucky me. I do not worry about that sort of stuff. For me, I have many books to read and also have taken up colour painting for meditation. I can recommend this to everybody.”

If anyone would like me to add any thoughts to share here, please email me at vicky@TaiChiQigong.co.uk

With many thanks & much appreciation & respect to my students, who are always my inspiration.

Practice well, Live well.

Vicky