

Taking the tai chi knee

Bob Price of Lincoln says: “My daily dose of tai chi has been interrupted by a long-overdue knee replacement so I have been asked to share a few thoughts on how I see this panning out over the next few weeks and months”

Up until the day of the operation I was persevering with a more-or-less daily routine of tai chi, qigong, riding my bike and (with a lesser frequency) a bit of pilates. Fortunately, I have always enjoyed exercise (55 years ago I trained as a PE teacher) and, even now, just a few weeks shy of my 74th birthday, exercising is a normal part of daily life. However, during recent months with knee surgery pending, there was the added incentive of a hope and belief that the fitter and stronger my leg was when the surgeon attacked it with hammer and saw, the quicker and easier might be the rehabilitation process.

Modern medicine still amazes me: surgery in the morning, physiotherapy during the afternoon and back home in the evening with my new knee protected by nothing more than a crepe bandage.

But, at this point, I should probably interject a word or two about pain: as my son explained (he is a GP and emergency medicine specialist), you can't subject a part of the body to the sort of trauma associated with joint replacement and not expect it to hurt. However, when they allow you home on the same day as the surgery it doesn't hurt at all, because all that lovely anaesthetic is still swimming around inside you. It is the day after (when the anaesthetic has worn off) that you discover what pain really is, and, boy, is it intense!

Happily, with a two-week supply of a whole cocktail of painkillers, every subsequent day is just a little bit better than the day before and, guided by the hospital's physiotherapy programme, the process of rehabilitation can be described as measured, incremental and effective. Apparently, for some people of my age, a 'successful' joint replacement is one which permits a gentle and more or less pain-free stroll. In my case, the bar was set slightly higher: my wife wants me back on the dance floor and I want to get back to my daily tai chi routine.

Now it must be said (lest the reader be misled into believing otherwise) that I am not a tai chi master. I had never even practised the art until retirement and, even then, it took me a few years to find a teacher to shine some light upon my tai chi darkness. Nowadays, I run a weekly tai-chi-in-the-park session for my neighbours and I have evolved a daily routine which, with some variation according to mood, time and the weather, includes:

- Master Huang's five loosening exercises
- A home made set of weight transfer/balance exercises
- A qigong routine (usually ba duan jin)
- Cheng Man-ch'ing's 37-step form5
- A few minutes of standing post

Of course, since my knee replacement this has all gone out the window. For the first two weeks after the operation, the focus was on pain management and the first tentative steps towards re-mobilising my knee. The hospital had provided a really useful physio guide, simple exercises, carefully graduated, and supplemented by brief periods of walking on sticks ... but nothing even remotely resembling tai chi.

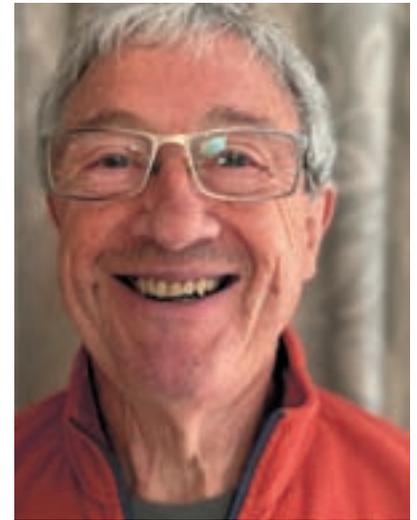
During weeks three and four, the physio routine was extended and intensified, the walking was increased in both time and distance and, whilst tai chi was still a step too far, I found a brief qigong session to be a really useful adjunct to at least one part of the physio.

By this time, my new knee had improved daily in terms of reduced swelling, less pain and good extension

but bending the knee was still a problem. The solution was to sit on an upright chair with my new knee flexed as far as pain/swelling/etc would allow and then to divert the mind from the obvious discomfort by focusing on a few minutes of seated qigong, for which the wu xing routine (which I found in Damo Mitchell's *Heavenly Streams: Meridian Theory in Nei Gong*) was just about perfect.

Weeks five and six involved more of the same, although I had dispensed altogether with the elbow crutches and could begin to focus more on quality of movement instead of the anything is better than nothing. About 18 months ago, when I was recovering from a total hip replacement, a physio friend saw me walking in the grounds where I live (and, then too, I had just abandoned crutches) and she offered the following advice: “Stop waddling like a duck and start marching like a soldier.” I also added some of the simpler weight transfer/balance exercises to my daily routine and this, I think, will be the key to my eventual return to tai chi. It seems to me that, when I can comfortably and confidently, slowly and smoothly, transfer my weight from one foot to the other (forwards, backwards and sideways), I should also be able to re-engage both with my qigong routine and the Cheng Man-ch'ing 37-step form even if, initially, it is all performed within a more limited range of movement than previously.

Although progress is slow and sometimes painful, it is at least progress that I can see and feel on a day-to-day basis so, I guess, the mantra has to be along the lines of ‘slowly, slowly, catchee monkey’. As Cheng Man-ch'ing might have said (but almost certainly did not): “Tai chi is an effortless and rhythmical art that stresses slow breathing, balanced and relaxed postures, and absolute calmness of mind.” As Mark Peters delights in reminding me, if I had found tai chi earlier in my life, I probably wouldn't have needed all these joint replacements in the first place. Happy days. 🍀



Bob Price

Getting back to form

The editor is not immune: in the middle of last year the John Roper found himself, unexpectedly, in the clutches of the NHS. Daily tai chi practice gave him the tools for a swift recovery...

Suddenly I can see daylight, my eyes open, I made it! I am on the recovery ward. Up above I can see bags and bottles of fluids plumbed into my arm. It turns out I am mainlining paracetamol. Didn't know you could do that.

Four hours earlier I was flat on my back with the anaesthetist setting me up for the operation. The surgeon joins us and enquires after my well being: "How are you feeling? I am OK. "Now," she asks, "tell me in your own words what you think is going to happen." You are going to disembowel me, I say. We all laughed.

And that is the last thing I remember of that Monday morning.

Two months previous, a CT scan had revealed a 'mass' on my bowel. It turned out to be a large polyp, if not cancer then at risk. It had to come out.

What friends are for

They say at times like this you find out who your friends are. When I said that I was in for a serious operation the markers started go on my stuff: "I hope it all goes OK, but got any decent whisky?" That's Frank, single malt fan and my first tai chi student. Still with me after 15 years. Then it's, "Oh, well, can you put my name on that antique rifle you have, just in case." Colin, my shooting buddy, we have a mutual interest in historic firearms. And then there are my hand-built, split cane fishing rods. Not that I fish these days But my pal Fred does.

When it comes to recovery the NHS doesn't hang about. I have an 'advanced recovery plan' and the day after the operation I woke from a doze to find a young lady kneeling by my bed. She is the physiotherapist she tells me and starts giving me the sales talk: "It is important to get moving as soon as you can, going for walks, at least sitting I say, "I teach tai chi. "Well no worries here then," she says and suddenly I am half way down the ward, feeling like my feet haven't touched the ground.

Starting again

I had had visions of being able to start tai chi straight away. I had no idea how stiff I would feel and how limited my movements would be. Not to mention the exhaustion. So, as well as walking several times a day, I started with a few exercises. Ji ben qigong I took from Damo Mitchell's book *Daoist Nei Gong*. Not the whole set, just 'compressing the pearl', 'flying hands' and 'swimming dragon' to start with, no lateral movement or twisting, all of these are standing straight. Plus threading the nine-holed pearl and a set of breathing exercises we use in the class. This is going to be the core from which I build back over the next four weeks.

And out

They don't like keeping you in these days and I soon went home. Surgery Monday and home in time for dinner on Thursday.

There was no way I could do the Yang 108 long form so



John Roper (R) teaching an application

I continued the ji ben qigong and the exercises trying to add a bit every morning. We practise zhang zhuan which I have always found to be a powerful meditation. When I started tai chi I had been practising Buddhist meditation for some 20 years. The first time I stood in zhang zhuan I felt my skin tingle and my pores open. I sweated. The form we use, seven hand positions, was devised by John Ding, my first master. I have on occasion stood for an hour. Right now 15 minutes is all I can manage.

Building back

But by the end of a week I had added the first part of the Yang form and 'up-lifting the moon' and 'opening the chest' to the ji ben qigong set. I also managed to take my class. In fact I only missed one class; the week I was in hospital, my daughter and a senior student ran things.

And so it went: daily practise, gradually building what I did. Not all plain sailing. It took a long time before I could do turning exercises. My movements were quite restricted by pain. I felt stiff, lifting my legs was a problem. But after four weeks I was able to add the third part of the Yang form. Caveat: take it easy plucking needles from sea bottom and definitely don't let the snake creep down too low!

Not for every one

So OK for me. Nineteen years of tai chi gave me the tools to recover quickly. But not everyone is so lucky. I became aware of the man in the bed opposite mine. He had a different problem to me and I thought he was unconscious. During my last day he was visited by a stream of doctors, at least two of them consultants. Their message was the same: "You have to get out of bed. We can help you but you must also help yourself." As long as I was there he never moved. He is younger than me. I can't help wondering what happened and, if I had felt more agile myself at that point, whether I should have staggered over and tried to persuade him... 🐍