

## Dr. Matthew Komelski on Tai Chi & Qigong

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Dr. Matthew Komelski  
*(courtesy of Dr. Komelski)*

Dr. Matthew Komelski is a Tai Chi/[Qigong](#) practitioner and Science Editor of the Center for Tai Chi & Qigong Studies. He received his Ph. D this summer in Human Development from Virginia Tech. Below is an edited version of my recent interview with him which he shared his story of how Tai Chi/Qigong saved his arm, his study of the healing arts and his research work.

**Violet:** How long have you been doing [Taichi](#) research? What prompted you to do research on Taichi? Any specific topics you have been working on?

**Matthew:** I did not begin looking at Tai Chi as a scientist until around 2005, when I began my PhD program. But I used my entire academic career to pursue the [martial arts](#). Early on I was mainly interested in training methods and combat applications. At Radford University, I sought out [Grandmaster Kwong Chi-Chung](#) to learn his protective qigong and combat fighting style (Dragon Tiger Eagle), which combines Choi Li Fut with other styles that Master Kwong studied growing up. Although I sought Master Kwong out to learn his fighting art, I was equally fortunate have had an equal number of lessons about perseverance, hard work, and responsibility.

I became interested in the healing side of qigong after suffering nerve damage and losing the use of

one arm. The prognosis from a neurologist was that I would never fully regain use of that arm. Not wanting to cancel my study trip to Japan, I left anyway and met a group of practitioners of *Shin I* (Ch. *Xinyi*), which is a practice with strong ties to the Chinese martial traditions. The teacher taught me standing practices (*Zhan Zhuang*), which completely rehabilitated my arm and back. From that point on, I took a deeper interest in the rehabilitative benefits of internal practices.

I continued to pursue the internal arts through a Master's program in Asian Studies at the University of Hawaii. I began to take an interest in how such practices alter life trajectories in multidimensional ways (socially, mentally, physically). In the developmental sciences there is currently a lot of interest in the potential of Tai Chi and related practices to improve health and quality of life as we age. So after finishing my Master's at UH, I was accepted into a PhD program at Virginia Tech and fully funded by the Department of Human Development.

My first official research project involved collecting data at last year's (2009) [International Tai Chi Symposium](#). I have been investigating the influence of various curricula on individual outcomes. For instance, how does a curriculum of only Tai Chi form training differs in effects from a curriculum that includes standing practices and form, or standing practices, form, and push-hands? **The data that I collected at the symposium suggests that, where health is concerned, curriculum, frequency of practice, and diet have significant influence on practitioner health, regardless of style.**

**Violet:** Do you practice any Taichi/Qigong styles?

**Matthew:** Over the years I have had opportunities to study many styles with some really great Tai Chi teachers. Grandmaster Kwong also taught me a version of the Yang 108 and another Tai Chi form called 7 Star. He used these to help me relax and improve my accuracy. Without them I would not have been able to achieve the speed and release power (*Fa Jing*). While in Hawaii, I was able to practice with several teachers who were engaged in various forms of Tai Chi (Yang, Wu, Wu Hao), Bagua, and Qigong. Hawaii is like a martial arts Mecca, so I was able to practice with one group or another every day. I was very fortunate that the UH offered coursework in the traditional Wu style 108 form and 5 Animal Frolics. These were taught by the head of Wu Style Tai Chi Hawaii, [Patricia Leong](#) *Laoshi* (Ch. Teacher); Every University should offer this kind of wisdom to its students.

At Virginia Tech, I met teachers visiting from Heilongjiang, China who shared the Chen style practice with me. We met almost every morning to work on silk-reeling and the Old Frame First Routine (Lao Jia Yi Lu). A few years back, I realized that I had really learned too many things to keep up with or to get very good at any of them. It happened that my research led me to cross paths with [Dr. Yang Yang](#). His book *Taijiquan* encouraged me to pick the essential elements out of what I had learned over the years, and to engage in what Dr. Yang has called the essential practices of Tai Chi: Sitting, standing, and lying down meditation, silk-reeling qigong, form, and partner training. After seeing the results of Dr. Yang's 2007 study with older adults, I became interested in his Evidence-Based Training (EBT) method for

teaching beginners. For the last several years I have been working with Yang Laoshi. I have had a lot of success reaching adults in my community with his method.

In my own practice, on a weekly basis, I try to keep a mix of fast and slow movement. I think the traditional advice in this regard, at least for adults, is about 80/20. 80% cultivation/refinement and 20% release. The 80% cultivation side of my training includes meditation, qigong, and partner training practices (i.e. push-hands). I get the 20% side of my workout from Fa Jing drills, Dragon Tiger Eagle system and others.

**Violet:** What do you see as a trend of Tai Chi/Qigong research?

**Matthew:** I think the future trend will involve “getting the fit.” Some studies have already reported that Tai Chi can drive people away when it is too complicated. The scientific community needs to understand which practices work best for beginners, both the general population and in special needs groups. When Tai Chi works, it works well, but getting it to “work well” for more people is where we need to go. Of course Tai Chi will not be for everyone, but I think it has the potential to reach more people, more effectively, than it is currently doing. There has not been much research on this topic, because the need for it has not been fully recognized in the scientific community. However, Dr. Yang’s work in this area, his EBT is an important and recent leap forward. Also at the International Tai Chi Symposium both researchers and practitioners had questions for the grandmasters about adapting Tai Chi. I think the Grandmasters’ advice was very pragmatic in this regard, something to the extent of ‘Get people to do whatever they can, while staying relaxed and in a good spirit/frame of mind.’

I am very interested in best practices and work regularly with special needs students to better understand what Tai Chi and qigong can offer students with ADHD, Autism Spectrum, and Traumatic Brain Injuries. It’s very challenging, but very rewarding too.

Another big area for the future is Tai Chi teacher training. Universities should play a bigger role in professionalizing Tai Chi and other mind-body practices. Most Tai Chi teachers I have met actively seek the knowledge they need to be of service to their students, but it is not always easy. Tai Chi teachers are in a great position to do a lot of good for our aging society, and everyone would benefit if Tai Chi teachers could access formal training in health, nutrition, and adult learning, as well as scientific and traditional/cultural methods. If universities were more involved, I think we would see tremendous gains for human culture and society.

**Violet:** What are the challenges of doing the research?

**Matthew:** To be honest I think there are a lot of problems in the field. Some scientists remain skeptical that Tai Chi is good for anything. The skepticism can probably be traced to several studies and meta-analyses that have found little or no results, but Peter Wayne and Ted Kaptchuk at [Harvard’s Osher Research Center](#) have called into question many of the methods being employed in studies. As they

pointed in a pair of 2008 articles published in the Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine, it is not really appropriate to study Tai Chi as if it were a drug. We should not conduct interventions using very simplistic or reductionist methods with little or no consideration of the complexity and context of regular Tai Chi practice. It's just not sound science to run a single simplistic intervention protocol for six months and claim that the findings (good or bad) speak for all of Tai Chi.

Other problems that seem to have plagued the field for decades include lack of interdisciplinary collaboration, and lack of an acceptable scientific framework with which to organize research. The work coming out of Harvard Medical School's Osher Research Center is trying to remedy this. I believe that Wayne and Kaptchuk's articles have the potential to transform the future of mind-body research. I hope all Tai Chi researchers read them. Also, Dr. Yang's efforts to bring great scientists together with Grandmasters and practitioners may have been just what the field needed for motivation and direction.

**Violet:** What are the channels that the research results have been shared at this point besides [Qi Dao eNewsletter](#)?

**Matthew:** Unfortunately research is typically disseminated through peer reviewed academic journals, although the national media has pick up a few stories about the benefits of Tai Chi for balance, immune function, and stress reduction. As science editor for the [Center for Tai Chi & Qigong Studies](#) (CTS), I try to publish a quarterly review of new findings on Tai Chi. I regularly look for articles through academic search engines and then relay the findings to the CTS readership.

**Violet:** What have we learned from these research results?

**Matthew:** Many of traditional proponents of Tai Chi have claimed that it can provide a pathway to healthy longevity. While cross-sectional studies of experienced practitioners generally support this claim, many controlled studies do not. In general, when we look at cross-sectional research on Tai Chi, that is, when we look at experienced Tai Chi practitioners, we tend to see that they are maintaining much higher levels of sensorimotor and cognitive function than others their age. However, several studies introducing Tai Chi as an intervention have not had as much success. I think the variation in findings shows that not all ways of doing Tai Chi produce the same results. Tai Chi is complex and human beings are too. I think that the success Dr. Yang has had is especially important, because he has arranged a curriculum that worked very successfully as an intervention. In my own research, I have tested some of Dr. Yang's ideas about curriculum across styles and found that older Tai Chi players with well rounded curriculum tended to have better health than other adults their age. Another important finding in my work was that healthy diets were predictive of Tai Chi practitioner health as well. I believe that if we could fund a longitudinal study on Tai Chi, we would find that Tai Chi players with unhealthy diets lose a lot of their hard earned advantages more quickly as they age.

**Violet:** Do you see any potential policy impact from the research?

**Matthew:** I am confident that Tai Chi programs could save the people of our country billions of dollars. **Dr. Kevin Chen's presentation at NIH** showed that the Chinese government was able to identify tremendous health care savings when tracking the medical use records of older Qigong and Tai Chi practitioners. There is no doubt in my mind that a greater emphasis on health promotion via mind-body practices would save the US billions in the long run, but more research needs to be conducted to determine a) best curriculums and regimens for particular populations, b) best Tai Chi teaching practices for US adult learners, c) best administrative and promotional practices to get Tai Chi working in communities. I think such efforts would greatly benefit from federal support, but in the long run, they would more than pay for themselves.



**Violet Li**

Tai Chi Examiner