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Blending The Roots and Rhythm of Tai Chi with Positive Psychology: A Handbook

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Blending The Roots and Rhythm of Tai Chi with Positive Psychology: A Handbook

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University of Pennsylvania

A Capstone Project Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Dr. Tayyab Rashid

August 1, 2012
Abstract

The purpose of this Capstone is to integrate principles of positive psychology into an educational training program for the Tai Chi for Health Institute. This integration will be disseminated in the form of a small handbook and will be put into practice as a presentation in June 2013, during the weeklong Tai Chi for Health workshop in New London, Connecticut (June 10-15, 2013). After briefly providing an introduction to the field of positive psychology, the paper describes two broad areas: 1) Harnessing the experience of positive emotions in conjunction with physical activity; and 2) Developing and using character strengths in the service of optimal performance. Subsumed within these topics, various positive interventions are described at length along with suggestions for application. An overarching aim of this paper is to synthesize the disciplines of Tai Chi and positive psychology for the purpose of cultivating greater health, happiness, and harmony on a personal and collective level.

Keywords: physical activity, positive emotions, character strengths, flow, intrinsic motivation, savoring, meditation, active constructive responding, positivity portfolio.
Introduction to Positive Psychology

Throughout the history of psychology there has been considerable interest in the human condition and what can fittingly be referred to as the act and art of living. Aristotle, an early predecessor to the field of psychology, gave thoughtful analysis to the topics of virtue, happiness, and friendship (Melchert, 2002); Friedrich Nietzsche formulated notions about the ideal superior human, or Übermensch (Sahakian, 1982); William James offered views on the cultivation of good habits (1892/1984); Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers spawned the twentieth century Humanistic movement which examined concepts such as motivation, personal growth, and the fully-functioning person (Hergenhahn, 2009). Each of the aforementioned focused on the healthier aspects of human personality as well as possibility. In contrast, what can be said for those distinguished individuals in psychology who have approached human personality with the aim of promoting a more actualizing and contented relationship toward life—but while employing the use of the scientific method? Since its inception in 1998, positive psychology (PP) has committed to this endeavor from a rigorous and systematic approach (Csikzentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000). Examining the conditions and processes which lead to a more active and fulfilling life, the dominant focus is on thriving and the more appreciative aspects of human nature. Just as Socrates insisted “the life which is unexamined is not worth living” (Jowett, 1988, p. 49), the explicit mission of PP is to explore the best within the set range of human personality and to then help others live in the upper thresholds of their set ranges.

Life can be much more than doom and gloom: life can also be one of deep engagement and great possibility. Prior to the arrival of PP, the conventional approach to mainstream psychology has been a general concern with the treatment and study of mental illness. Seminal work done by Freud, Jung, Skinner, and Ellis focused largely on human dysfunctions, deficits,
and disorders. Influenced by this deficit-model of psychology, the National Institute of Mental
Health (NIMH) seems to have branded a certain legacy and direction on the field. This fact is
illustrated by a recent PsychINFO literature review conducted in July 2012 (Gruver, 2012).
PsychINFO is an enormous database of scholarly articles published by the American
Psychological Association. In examining the ratio of negative-to-positive states, this literature
review revealed a 24:1 ratio in favor of negative-to-positive states: that is, for every one article
on a positive condition, say, happiness, serenity, and stress relief, there are 24 articles on, say,
depression, anxiety, and stress. What does this data tell us? This information provides a glaring
portrait of where modern psychology has largely invested its resources and attention (based on
the deficit-model discussed earlier).

Although much suffering has been alleviated from this approach, such a negativity bias
has proven insufficient and even costly (Seligman, 2008). The ultimate key is not a denial of
negative reality. Life is comprised of good and bad, glad and sad, and both ends of the spectrum
deserve the care of our attention. And that is why Seligman (who initiated the PP movement) has
advocated for psychology to be just as interested in what is right with people and how to nurture
it as it is with the failings of people and how to repair it. With such a focus, a paradigm shift can
result along with a more balanced presentation of human nature and marked increases in general
wellbeing (Sheldon & King, 2001).

To bring about this paradigm shift, the essence of PP has focused its research on what
promotes flourishing individuals, institutions, and communities. But what exactly is flourishing?
According to Seligman (2011), the components of flourishing are captured in a wellbeing theory
that can be described by the acronym of **PERMA** (Positive emotions, Engagement,
Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement). These components of PERMA theory are defined in
Table 1 in Appendix A. The PERMA theory is comprised of conditions which are not mutually exclusive but where their synergistic dynamic allows one to live in the upper reaches of optimal functioning and life’s enjoyment.

Given that human wellbeing entails a kaleidoscope of dimensions, when it comes to assessment it is often tempting to isolate one specific aspect—such as physical health, psychological functioning, or social and/or emotional wellbeing. This is an unnecessary dichotomy as humans are an integrated system where conditions on one level can ripple throughout the entire organism. For example, when exercise results in an increase in positive emotions as well as decreases in negative states, such as depression or hypertension (Mutrie & Faulkner, 2004). One area of wellbeing that has been grossly overlooked is the dynamic of the body and also physical activity in its role on overall wellbeing. According to the World Health Organization, health is “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (World Health Organization, 1948, p. 28). In alignment with the approach of PP, there is more to wellness than “the absence of disease” or the isolation of one specific facet: an active cultivation of positive conditions as well as a holistic approach to wellbeing is just as essential. Research and application of PP principles will be far more effective in bringing about wholesome change that encapsulates integration of mind and body, on both an individual and group level.

Are there institutions today that aspire to such an ideal—and where the organization could then become a paragon for integrative wellness? Founded by Dr. Paul Lam and with the explicit purpose of empowering people to improve their own health and wellness, the Tai Chi for Health Institute is but one exemplar (Tai Chi for Health Institute, 2012). As a family physician and Tai Chi expert, Mr. Lam’s organization offers safe, easy-to-learn, and effective Tai Chi
programs to a wide range of interests and levels of expertise. Moreover, the organization upholds a guiding intention for medical research and scientific backing to inform the programs (Fransen et al., 2007). Having reached over two million people from around the globe, the vision and outreach of the organization remains outstanding. Tai Chi is not a cure-all, but it does have multiple benefits along with the potential of prompting a new health revolution.

What unifies the mission of the PP movement and the Tai Chi for Health Institute (TCHI) is that they actively foster the quality and satisfaction of life of those around the world. Both can also be seen as life-enhancing interventions that qualify as prevention. Given these noble intentions, the overlap of the Tai Chi for Health Institute and positive psychology cannot be overstated.

The purpose of this Capstone is to integrate principles of positive psychology into an educational training program for the Tai Chi for Health Institute. This integration will be disseminated in the form of a small handbook and will be put into practice as a presentation in June 2013, during the weeklong Tai Chi for Health workshop in New London, Connecticut (June 10-15). Although TCHI has been bolstered with medical support concerning the physical benefits of Tai Chi—alleviating arthritis, improving balance and coordination, the lowering of high blood pressure (Choi et al., 2005)—there has been little attention focusing on the emotional, psychological, and even social benefits of this ancient Chinese moving meditation within the Tai Chi for Health community. To this end, the aim of this Capstone is to offer relevant insights from positive psychology that will serve as training for the Master Trainers, Senior Trainers, and Instructors throughout the Tai Chi for Health Institute.
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Part I  Fertile Conditions for Learning

1  Physical Activity and Harnessing the Power of Positive Emotions

Physical activity is an essential ingredient to a flourishing life. Physical activity is comprised of a broad range of intentions that get the body moving, from walking to structured exercise programs to sports (Mutrie & Faulkner, 2004). The activities engaged in are limitless and the general gold standard of involvement is that “adults accumulate 30 minutes (and children 60 minutes) of moderate-intensity physical activity (equivalent to brisk walking) on most days of the week” (p. 147). Drawing from extensive research, Mutrie and Faulkner chronicle the numerable benefits of physical activity: improved quality of sleep, a greater ability to cope with stress and adversity, enhanced quality of life and subjective wellbeing, raised self-esteem, a lengthened lifespan, and also more effective functioning on a cognitive level. Stated in another manner, a lack of physical activity can increase the likelihood of depressive and anxiety disorders. One of the most impressive findings in the research is that being physically active as a way of life can be just as effective as anti-depressants in alleviating emotional distress associated with depression (Babyak et al., 2000).

In a literature review that examined the effects of physical-activity interventions on physical and mental health, Penedo and Dahn (2005) discovered that exercise substantially improved quality of life, mood states, conditions on a variety of physical health measures, and overall functional capacity, as compared with a control group. Tai Chi, a form of physical activity, serves as many things to many different people: it can be a full range-of-motion exercise, a gentle relaxation technique, a form of self-defense, and a graceful art form in its higher manifestations. But can Tai Chi also be a springboard for transforming our lives through the harnessing of positive emotions?
“Going through the motions can trigger the emotions,” states researcher David Myers in his book *The Pursuit of Happiness* (1992, p. 125). Myers makes a claim that underscores the relational importance of physical activity on our emotional wellbeing. Tai Chi, along with other forms of physical activity, nurtures the focal power of the mind while mobilizing the body. Yet just as vitally impacted are the emotional responses we derive through physical activity. Why is this important?

A pioneer in the field of positive emotion research, Dr. Barbara Fredrickson has extensively explored the impacts of positive emotions on the quality of our lives. Her findings are captured in the Broaden-and-Build theory (Fredrickson, 2005). As fleeting as positive emotions may be, Fredrickson’s research shows that the recurring experience of positive emotions (such as serenity, amusement, joy, inspiration, and others) can significantly change our lives for the better. Through the process of conducting carefully designed studies, Fredrickson has revealed the beneficial impact that positive emotions have on our vital engagement in the world (Fredrickson, 2001), the clarity and creativity of our thoughts (1998), the closeness and richness of our relationships (Vacharkulksemsuk & Fredrickson, 2012), the betterment of our physical health (Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998), a buffer for our resiliency (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004), even the upward and animating vitality of our life force (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002).

As instructors and wellness-promoters, we can have an impact on the lives of our students. The intrinsic benefits of Tai Chi are realized more and more when the practice and principles of this moving mediation are integrated into one’s daily life. Yet also finding moments throughout class to openly address and cultivate positive emotions can lead to a greater likelihood of a flourishing state. Listed below are recommendations from positive psychology
that can be used in conjunction with one’s classes, workshops, or seminars—either during the classes themselves or as take-home exercises for your students.

Three Good Things: What-Went-Well Exercise

Can the simple act of recalling what went well throughout the day have an impact on our mood, attitude, and general well-being? Much research has been given to the topic of ‘counting one’s blessings’. Studies show that recalling, writing about, and then taking a moment to reflect on the causes of the good events in our day can increase levels of happiness while also decreasing symptoms of depression (Seligman et al., 2005; Lyubomirksy et al., 2005; Lambert et al., 2009). The key, however, is to commit to this practice on a daily basis much like brushing one’s teeth. In being receptive to the various good fortunes of our day, we are essentially priming our awareness to see more positive conditions. Over time, there soon can come the intuitive grasp that positive experiences are just as much created and willed, as well. With continual practice, an internalized pattern of perceiving can be fostered and this can heighten both our awareness and enjoyment of life.

In conducting this What-Went-Well exercise, first gather a notebook to serve as your journal. Toward the end of the day, take a few moments to reflect upon what went well. In your journal, make a list of three good things that unfolded for you. It can be large or small in scope. For example, “I enjoyed a stroll in the park with a close friend” or “The spaghetti for dinner was fantastic” may make it onto your list. After you have compiled three items for which you are grateful, take a few moments to answer the question “Why did this good thing happen?” Below your previous items, you might respond “I haven’t seen this friend in weeks and I love how naturally we connect with one another” or “My husband made a delicious sauce which had a
In committing to this practice on a daily basis, you may begin to see recurring patterns to the events, activities, or circumstances that brighten up your world. Be open and receptive to these. Events you may have overlooked previously may take on a whole new level of importance. And also, feel inclined to share these good events with those close to you. There is a general tendency for people to unload their burdens on others. How about opening up a dialog regarding our joys? This What-Went-Well exercise can be of great advantage to your Tai Chi sessions, as well. Cultivate in yourself and encourage your students to apply this exercise to their own Tai Chi practice or even in the examining of your own methods of teaching. As the sayings go: *where the mind goes, the chi flows*—and what we dwell upon grows.

For at least a week, give this exercise a chance and see if it makes a qualitative difference in your life. After one week, consider reviewing your journal entries and take stock of any noteworthy trends or themes that have positively impacted you.

**Savoring**

“Eternity is in the moment for those who know how to place it there.”

-Benedetto Croce, Italian philosopher

With the busy tempo of many of our daily lives, slowing down can be a challenge—let alone justifying doing so. Marinating in the moment can often be the last of our engagements. After all, aren’t there more pressing things to consider than savoring a mere, momentary encounter? According to psychologist Christopher Peterson (2006), *savoring* refers to “our awareness of pleasure and our deliberate attempt to make it last” (p. 69). The deliberate deepening of our relationship to sights, sounds, tastes, aromas, memories or anticipations, can
not only be rewarding in itself, but it positively impacts our levels of happiness. Psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky (2007) reports findings that “Those skilled at capturing the joy of the present moment—hanging on to good feelings, appreciating good things—are less likely to experience depression, stress, guilt, and shame” (p. 192). So be here now!

Given what are clearly the downstream benefits of savoring, what strategies can we employ to amplify the various positives in our lives? Below are nine suggestions condensed from Fred Bryant and Joseph Veroff’s fantastic book *Savoring: A New Model Of Positive Experience* (2007), both of whom are leading authorities on the subject:

- Share with others (relate to others an experience that impacted you positively)
- Build memories (take ‘mental snapshots’ with the aim of reminiscing later on)
- Personal acknowledgements (examine your role at the focal center of the experience)
- Slow down and sharpen sensory perception (i.e.: marinate in the moment!)
- Cultivate mindfulness (be deliberately present/vitally engaged in your experience)
- Translate your joy physically (high-5s, hugs, laughter, cheerful or serene smiles, etc.)
- Appreciate that time flies (for maintaining a sense of proportion to one’s life)
- Count your blessings (affirming that which you are grateful for)
- No killjoy thinking (avoid intrusive thoughts that hinder your reception of the event)

With these tips that enhance savoring, consider the ways you can promote this practice in your classes as well as personal life. Perhaps taking time at the end of a class to encourage reminiscing about one good thing that occurred during the session; use positive visualization to relive an event that bred joy or pride or love; articulate to others the qualities you see and admire
most in them; be wakeful to the rhythmic patterns of your breathing. The possibilities are endless and, over time, this bit of gratitude in your attitude can transform your days for the better.

Positivity Portfolio

In the remarkably insightful book *Positivity* (2009), Barbara Fredrickson lists ten key positive emotions: joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love. Along with outlining the many transformative facets of positivity in general, Fredrickson discusses the nature and conditions of these unique emotional states. Like a kaleidoscope with many different shades, positivity is multi-faceted and can lend color, shape, and form to our daily experience. In addition to careful analysis of these ten positive emotions, Fredrickson also suggests ways for bringing more positivity into our daily lives. In this regard, she recommends creating a positivity portfolio.

Fredrickson (2009) recommends choosing an emotion you want to cultivate and to then assemble a collection of meaningful items that pertain to it. For instance, you may find yourself wanting to strengthen your motivation as you pursue a challenging ambition. Or perhaps you are weathering a difficult time in your life. You may choose to focus on the emotion of ‘hope’. Now begin to gather an array of items that serve as expressions of hope in your life. This can be in the form of music, quotes, clips from movies, inspiring lines from literature or personal cards and letters, symbolic artifacts, photographs, or any other object that exudes the emotional state you want to create. Once these items are assembled, for one week and a recommended 15 minutes a day, be completely absorbed in the presence of your positivity portfolio. Become aware of why you cherish these items and draw upon their special dynamics to subtly energize and renew your
mood. You may also want to revisit positive memories you have of others. Are there individuals in your life who have been pillars of warmth and support? Sit along the river of your heart and mind and be with them. Soak it all in. Draw upon the strength and appreciation you feel and let the experience uplift your mood.

Once the desired state is created, the reported sensation is often as if dust has been wiped from your perspective and you can now embark with fresh resolve. As the experience can be powerful, use this positive priming to your advantage. Once you have derived the benefits of one emotional state, switch to another of your choosing while following the same process. Fredrickson offers a further suggestion in that, “view your positivity portfolios as living documents. Let them evolve. Update them. Bear in mind that they need to stay fresh to uplift your positivity” (Fredrickson 2009, p. 220).

Before you recommend this exercise to your students, try out this positive intervention on your own and see what kind of an impact it has on you. To enhance the benefits of this exercise, you may want to discuss the experience with friends, colleagues, family members, or even your students. Consider the questions: What was your initial reaction while creating the positivity portfolio?; how was your experience during the savoring encounter?; what were the benefits or drawbacks from conducting this exercise?; did the exercise generate a renewing experience which carried over into your day-to-day doings?; what ways could you further tailor the exercise to reap more benefit next time?

**Mindfulness Meditation**

Along with deep-breathing techniques, mindfulness meditation is a tool that has been used for centuries to promote greater health, happiness, and harmony (McCown et al., 2010).
“Mindfulness meditation cultivates open awareness and unobstructed, direct, and full contact with experience; it is the foundation of Theravadan and Tibetan Buddhist meditation practice,” acknowledges renown polyhistorian Ken Wilber (2006, p. 236). In Tai Chi, synchronized movements are guided by mindful attention on our breathing patterns, tempo, transference of weight, postural alignment, and situational awareness both inwardly and in the environment. Mindfulness meditation is a crucial element of Tai Chi and no wonder it has commonly been referred to as ‘meditation in motion’. This quintessential mind-body practice is not only beneficial for promoting physical health, but also for promoting peaceful and positive states of being.

In a study that examined the effects of mindfulness meditation and somatic relaxation training (Tai Chi, for example), Jain and colleagues (2007) discovered that both interventions led to significant declines in distress as well as increases in positive moods, as compared with a control group. Given this reality, it could be beneficial to not only detail for your students the psychological impacts of mindfulness and relaxation training on emotional wellbeing, but to also encourage them to harness the power of such positive priming. In effect, Tai Chi can be used as a vehicle for spawning positive emotions. Below is a list of step-by-step instructions for a meditation session that is accompanied with deep-breathing techniques. Including a meditation session in your class, personal practice at home, or as a daily way of life can have pronounced impacts, as many seasoned practitioners are apt to report.

“When the mind is clear, the eyes see more.”
-Chinese Proverb

Equipment: Mindfulness meditation and deep-breathing techniques can be performed in virtually any condition or setting, but loose clothing, a seated area, and a quiet environment are preferable.
1) Find a quiet place and time of the day where you will be left undisturbed.

   **Tip:** Morning hours are ideal. The mind is generally less consumed and it will make for a more calm and composed start to your day.

2) On the edge of a seat or cushion, sit with your back and neck comfortably upright. Lengthen your spine into a poised yet supple posture.

3) Place your feet flat on the floor as your arms dangle loosely by your side. You can also rest your hands in your lap.

4) Allow your eyes to close gently as you remain mentally alert. Take a moment and internally scan your entire body. Guide your awareness from the soles of your feet up to the crown of your head. How is your body feeling today? Just notice any areas of comfort or tension throughout your muscles, bones and joints.

5) Pay attention to the patterns of your breathing. Is your breath consigned to the upper chest region or is it located in the mid-section or lower diaphragm? Notice how the rhythms of your breathing are short-long; fast-slow; choppy-even; labored-expansive. For steps 4 and 5, the aim is to simply cultivate such mind-body awareness. Ideally, the goal is to establish your respiration in long, slow, even, and expansive intervals.

6) Bring your focus to the area directly below your nose. Slowly inhale through the nose as you feel the air filter through the nasal region. Notice how your chest lightly expands.

7) On each inhale, silently and steadily count to five. When you reach the top of your inhale, exhale softly through your nose as you count to seven.

8) Repeat step 7 for a series of five rounds.

   **Tip:** Your mind may begin to drift or wander during this session. This is perfectly natural. When it does, gently bring your focus back to the area directly below your nose. As you
continue to count, stay wakeful and present.

9) Shift your concentration to the abdominal region as you use this region as an anchor for your awareness. As you sink your breath deeper into your stomach, feel your belly expand with each inhale as it deflates with each exhale.

   **Tip:** It may help to think and imagine the words In-Out, Deep-Slow, with each respective inhale and exhale. This will steady the mind as you continue to ride the waves of your breathing.

10) Perform belly-breathing for a series of five to 10 intervals. Notice the breath lengthen, the body relax, the mind quiet.

11) At the close of belly-breathing exercise, finish out your session with a few moments of visualization to promote further tranquility.

   **Note:** Visualization is the use of your imagination to consciously create what you want (Lam & Miller, 2006). Think of a natural setting you enjoy. Imagine a place you remember where you felt safe and serene. It can be a body of water, a sandy shore, in the mountains, a grassy slope, or any other spot you find peaceful. Visualize this setting as bodily relaxation grows, awareness heightens, sensitivity deepens, mental clarity expands.

12) Practice for 10 to 20 minutes a day, and preferably every day.

13) To close out session, tap or shuffle your feet slightly to bring greater blood and circulation to the lower-half.

2. **Working From A Platform of Strength**

   In the field of positive psychology, an essential aim toward improving the human condition is having a focus on strengths of character. Traditional psychology has spent many decades fixating on what is wrong with people and with an attempt to repair it. Positive
psychology, on the other hand, is also addressing what is right with people and how to cultivate it. To carry out this initiative, distinguished scholars from a wide range of fields formulated the first systematic classification of character strengths and virtues called Values in Action (VIA) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Initiated in 2000, the mission initially focused on questions of positive youth development: how can we assist children in becoming more resilient while possessing greater levels of authentic self-esteem? The project soon evolved into a focus on humanity as a whole.

From the Occident to the Orient, the project was informed by insights gleaned from cross-cultural studies which examined the values and virtues considered ideal. Various religious and philosophical traditions were also explored. The VIA classification entails six core virtues that are universally recognized: Wisdom, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence. These six virtues subsume 24 character strengths. For a viewer-friendly diagram of the six core virtues as well as 24 strengths of character, please see Diagram 1 in Appendix B.

According to researchers at the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP), strengths are defined as “our pre-existing patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior that are authentic, energizing, and which lead to our best performance” (Biswas-Diener, 2010, p. 21). Robert Biswas-Diener, a prominent scholar-practitioner in the field of positive psychology, goes on to affirm that strengths “are where are greatest successes happen, where we experience enormous growth, and where we enjoy a burst of energy and happiness” (2010, p. 20). The benefits and rationale for working from a platform of strengths are obvious: In a certain way, having a focus on the areas where we function optimally and at our prime (and to then cultivate it) is a call-to-arms to the very best within each and every person. The over-arching objective is
to assist oneself and others in identifying a repertoire of strong suits. The nurturing of such strengths can then provide individuals a range of opportunities in engaging their lives to a more effective and personally meaningful advantage.

On the website [www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org), the Institute of Character offers a free online Survey for those interested. This scientifically validated self-assessment tool is highly encouraged for those seeking to further develop their own strengths as well as the personal attributes of others. Once the survey is completed, you are provided a list of 24 strengths that are ranked in descending order to which they are in harmony with your natural capacities for greatness. Having a detailed report of where you shine can be informative, insightful, inspiring, and also validating. Your personal and professional life can take on a brand new dynamic when you begin to implement ways of further using your strengths on a daily basis. To assist in the process, below is an action plan that was devised by positive psychotherapist Tayyab Rashid. But take the survey first. Then think through and write out ideas to the questions which can then facilitate you in this strengths-based orientation. And for more practical ideas in using character strengths, please see 340 Ways at [www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org) under the headliners VIA Pro, Resources, Resources-Articles, then look for 340 Ways by Tayyab Rashid (or simply see [http://www.tayyabrashid.com](http://www.tayyabrashid.com), 2013).

**Signature Strength Action Plan**

Use your signature strengths to become the sort of person you always wanted to be. Are you looking to solve problems which need to be solved? What is your plan? What exactly is it you would like to do? How frequently? Who else will be involved? When will this happen? What would happen if you achieve these goals?

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Getting Into the Flow of It

Distinguished professor of psychology Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues have spent years examining the connection between optimal functioning and enjoyment in everyday activities. Csikszentmihalyi has found that “the best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile,” (1990, p. 3). Csikszentmihalyi explains that “optimal experience is thus something that we make happen” (1990, p. 3). The colloquial term he has given this condition is flow.

Whether it is a hobby, sport, job, or fundamental approach toward living, flow occurs when a person is vitally absorbed in a voluntary activity that demands high levels of concentration and the engagement of one’s knowledge, skills, and abilities. Think of the many different activities in your day-to-day life, not to mention Tai Chi, which can fall within this scope. In his book *Flow: The Psychology Of Optimal Experience* (1990), Csikszentmihalyi outlines eight facets of this valued state:

- The activity is challenging and requires skill
- One’s attention is completely absorbed by the activity
- The activity has clear goals
- There is clear feedback
- One can concentrate only on the task at hand
One achieves a sense of personal control

One loses self-consciousness

One loses a sense of time

The fundamental quality that unites flow experiences is an optimal balance between a person’s skills and the task at-hand (Moneta & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). In appreciating that more flow can lead to more fulfillment, we can begin to structure our personal lives as well as our class sessions to reap the greatest benefit. With the latter objective in mind, let us focus on two main conditions that help induce flow:

1) *The activity has clear goals.* To foster the likelihood of flow for your students, make their goals clear by teaching them one objective at a time. Instead of focusing on many principles like fluidity of motion, loosening the joints, being conscious of weight transference and maintaining an upright posture, choose one essential Tai Chi principle to work with during that session. Be clear and upfront with your students beforehand and work toward cultivating the principle throughout the session. You can further this aim by letting your students know what is on the agenda for the class and also demonstrating the principle and movement you intend to cover.

2) *There is clear feedback.* It’s commonly understood that we cannot hit a target we do not see, and this gets to the importance of providing clear feedback to your students. Along with establishing well-defined goals, assessing your students’ performance objectively and supportively is essential. Take for instance the teaching of *Single Whip*, a beginner-level movement. After ensuring that the movement is being performed within the bounds of safety, focus specifically on one particular aspect of the performance. Instead of addressing a student
from a wide range of angles or by saying, “You are looking better by the week” (which is a vague observation that provides little to build upon), offer a more detailed comment like “When you transitioned from the delivery of Single Whip to the opening of Wave Hands in Clouds, I noticed a fluid suppleness to your posture. How did the movement feel and did it aid in your transition?” This is but one example of providing clear feedback. After class, you may also encourage your students to be receptive to the intrinsic benefits they derived from their Tai Chi session. Whether it is relieved tension throughout the body, deepened relaxation, or expansiveness to one’s breathing, these too are a form of feedback that can offer guidance throughout the learning process.

In Tai Chi, an aim is to integrate the mind and the body with the breath through a series of synchronized movements. In doing so, a mental state similar to flow can occur. Through continued practice and the cultivation of Tai Chi’s essential principles throughout the forms, your skills will improve along with the likelihood of experiencing flow. Flow induces both mastery and a sense of enrichment, which then can drive you to practice more. More practice can result in more flow, and the upward cycle continues. In summing up the benefits of flow, Csikszentmihalyi concludes that “[f]low is important both because it makes the present instant more enjoyable, and because it builds self-confidence that allows us to develop skills and make significant contributions to humankind” (1990, p. 42).

**Intrinsic Motivation**

One of the most enriching (as well as challenging) aspects of leadership is mobilizing the effort and aspiration of others. Motivation comes in all shapes and sizes. Depending on the activity and also the person, some people are motivated by personal growth and the prospect of
using one’s full capacities toward a worthwhile aim; in other individuals and other instances, people can be motivated by the promise of prestige or financial success or winning the approval of others. Is one general form of motivation of greater value than another? No one can determine for someone else what the proper motivation should be, but science does reveal that those who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to experience greater rewards in the realm of wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

What does intrinsic motivation entail? According to Kirk Brown and Richard Ryan (2004), two prominent theorists in the field of motivation, “activities are intrinsically motivated when they are done for the interest and enjoyment they provide” (p. 106). Contrast this with extrinsic motivation which is largely generated by external factors or the use of reward and punishment. Whether one is engaged in leisure activities or work pursuits, people who operate for the mere sake of and sheer enjoyment of a task are said to have an intrinsic orientation—and which has been associated with greater “creativity,” “task performance,” and “higher psychological well-being” (Brown & Ryan, 2004, p. 107).

To facilitate the bounty of intrinsic motivation in oneself and in others, it’s important to be receptive to the inherent joy that is derived from an activity. Below are a few suggestions to bring one into greater contact with the satisfaction gained from Tai Chi.

- In your own personal practice, it may be helpful to evaluate your current involvement with Tai Chi. A wide range of motivations may be at play and the purpose of this reflection is to simply be aware of the variables influencing you.

- To grow and develop and gain greater benefit from Tai Chi, you may wish to seek out information regarding the rich history of this internal art as well as its application. Exploring foundational books and reading commentary from other Tai Chi Masters
can lend a deeper insight and appreciation to your own form.

- Tailor your personal practice to a time and setting that is conducive to you. This can enhance the quality of the engagement.

- Before setting off on a session, establish specific goal(s) or Tai Chi principle(s) you would like to focus on. This can help facilitate a sense of accomplishment as well as competence along the way. This suggestion applies equally as well to your classes.

- As an instructor, permit your students options and choices throughout the class. After the bulk of your teaching session is through, allow your students a “make-it-your-own” time where they can tailor what they learned to their specific needs, interests, and levels of expertise.

- After the closing of a class, open a dialog with your students as to what they found most beneficial or rewarding about the session.

- As a ‘take home assignment’, encourage your students to identify one area of improvement and to then focus intently on that before the next session.

- As gradual progress is made, reward yourself in a pleasurable and meaningful fashion. Taking responsibility for one’s health and wellbeing is a virtuous act. Don’t hesitate to reasonably indulge in some comfort.

- In promoting a new Tai Chi class or appealing to groups or an audience, incorporate intrinsic variables as ‘marketing points’ (i.e.: Tai Chi deepens relaxation, increases vitality, improves balance and coordination, enhances flexibility and fitness, promotes a sense of harmony, etc.).
High Quality Connections with Others: Active–Constructive Responding

Think of a recent time when someone shared with you a positive bit of news. How did you respond to them? There is often a characteristic tone to the conversational style we have with others. Whether it is with family, friends, co-workers, our students, or even passers-by on the street, a distinctive style tends to emerge. Of course, our mood at the time and the situation we are in can influence our general ways of responding. Yet when good news is being addressed and our interactive style is both actively engaged and constructively delivered, this tone has a way of turning up the lights and music in our relationships.

Research shows that ‘capitalization’—our affirming response that builds upon the positive events of others—can actually amplify the benefits associated with the event as well deepening the bond we share with another (Gable et al., 2004). However, the key resides in how we respond to the good events of others, and to illustrate this here are four characteristic ways of responding:

- **Active-constructive responding** (an enthusiastic response): “That’s wonderful! What did it feel like once you made it through the 73-movement form for the first time?”
- **Active-destructive responding** (a response that focuses on a drawback): “There are 10 minutes you’ll never get back; what a waste of time and energy.”
- **Passive-constructive responding** (a subdued response): “Good effort. Keep it up.”
- **Passive-destructive responding** (a disinterested response): “Well in other news, I am visiting the optometrist tomorrow.”

For a visual display of these four ways of responding, please see Figure 1 in Appendix C.

Research shows that those who are more prone to active-constructive responding (ACR)
experience an increased degree of positive emotions, greater subjective wellbeing, stronger social support, a deeper and more satisfying commitment to the relationship, and not to mention the wonderful gesture of providing others care and validation (Gable et al., 2006).

There are many opportunities within one’s day to experiment with ACR. For starters, begin at home! Like casting a new lens before your eyes, be receptive to the good tidings of family and friends. Experiment with ACR and see if (and in what ways) it lends a positive impact. In the Tai Chi for Health community, there are ample opportunities to employ ACR: the recent certification of a peer; watching your students or friends master each progressive movement throughout a form. In beginning a workshop, it may be beneficial to open up the group by going around and briefly sharing one good event that happened recently. Use this as an opportunity to build a rapport among one another. If your class is already established, perhaps set aside time once a month to gather as a group outside of class and share in the joys and pleasures of each other. This social gathering could be over tea or lunch or any other activity mutually agreed upon.

A final point worth mentioning is that there is a positive correlation between the social support we receive from others and our general wellbeing. This is referred to as ‘the buffering hypothesis’ (Cohen & Wills, 1985) and those individuals who have a nurturing network of relationships are characterized by greater personal resourcefulness, psychological adjustment, and diminished amounts of stress. Active-constructive responding, a means of promoting more affirming relationships, can contribute to our wellbeing during moments of conflict and also positive experiences.
Recommended Books


# Appendix A

**PERMA Table**

Table 1. PERMA, the Theory of Well-being (Seligman, 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Emotions</td>
<td>Experiencing positive emotions such as contentment, pride, serenity, hope, optimism, trust, confidence, gratitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Immersing oneself deeply in activities which utilize one’s strengths to experience an optimal state marked by heightened concentration, intrinsic motivation, and an optimal state of functioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Having positive, secure &amp; trusting relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td>Belonging to and serving something with a sense of purpose and belief that is larger than the self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplishment</td>
<td>Pursuing success, mastery &amp; achievement for its own sake</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

VIA Character Strengths & Virtues Diagram

Diagram 1. VIA Character Strengths & Virtues (Peterson and Seligman, 2004)
## Appendix C

### 2x2 Matrix: Four Ways of Responding Figure

Figure 1. 2x2 Matrix: Four Ways of Responding (Rashid, in press)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructive</th>
<th>Destructive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Active-Constructive Responding</strong></td>
<td><strong>Active</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enthusiastic support, elaborates the experiences; person feels validated and understood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Display:</strong> maintaining eye contact, smiling Displaying positive emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Passive</strong></td>
<td>Quiet, understated support; conversation fizzles out; person feels unimportant, misunderstood, embarrassed, guilty, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Illustration:</strong> “That’s nice that you are being considered for the promotion.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Display:</strong> happy, but subdued expressions lacking enthusiasm; downplaying; little to no active emotional expressions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


trial of 200 subjects comparing Tai Chi, hydrotherapy and control, to measure improvement in pain, physical function, muscular strength and walking capacity.

*Arthritis Care and Research, 57* (3), 407-414.


