

Workshop with Master Paulie Zink, International Martial Arts Grand Champion and Creator of Yin Yoga

By Sharon Steffensen

In Paulie Zink's Yin yoga workshops, you practice poses you've never heard of before, like seahorse, deer, and T-Rex. As you do the poses, you are also connecting to the five elements of nature, which, according to Taoist philosophy, are earth, metal, wood (which contains air), water, and fire. These elements are related to feelings of stability, firmness, joy, fluidity, and enthusiasm, respectively. Depending on how Paulie sequences the postures, you may feel grounded and serious in one moment, and lightness and laughter in the next. Paulie was in Chicago April 6–12, leading a workshop and teacher training at Chicago Yoga Center.

In Yin yoga, a style of yoga that Paulie created (more about that later), Paulie calls attention to the principles of *yin* and *yang* (feminine and masculine). He also brings in aspects of *Chi Kung* to the mix, which is a Chinese practice of aligning breath, movement, martial arts, and philosophy for exercise, healing, and meditation. Add these to the movements he's observed from watching animals (or watching animated documentaries in the case of T-Rex), and the result is an intense, yet playful, experience. The primary purpose of Yin yoga is to restore and enliven our innate ability to move with fluidity, power, and grace.

Another benefit of Yin yoga is its potential ability to heal. When our bodies are lacking in, or have an excess of, any of the elements, we can do postures to add more of the element or



Paulie Zink leads students in seahorse pose, of the water element giving birth to wood, for balance, at Chicago Yoga Center.

poses of another element to correct the imbalance. For example, if a person feels ungrounded or spacey, he or she would practice more grounding (earth) poses. In the case of excess fire (inflammation or alcohol or drug addiction), a person would perform water poses to counteract the fire.

During the workshop, we infused our bodies with the element associated with the posture we were practicing. In seated postures, we faced downward toward the earth and felt our bodies being pulled into the earth below. In seahorse pose, which is related to water and wood, we jolted as we jumped forward in the posture. In penguin pose, which is metal, a quality necessary when walking against the wind, we felt solid as we moved stiff-legged with our arms at our sides. We experienced the water element in doing the deer and frog poses.

Bird postures and monkey poses, which have fire energy, bring fun, laughter, and joy. Just seeing a monkey makes one laugh, said Paulie. "They are fast and light, they jump, they're ungrounded. Seeing them gives energy."

Paulie said, "I like feeling primal and like an animal. You have to embody the animal and get the healing properties.... Feel the animal's energy, which can heal you if you need those energies."

Every posture contains all five elements because they are inseparable, said Paulie. For example, deer, which is primarily water, walks slowly and gives birth to the earth, but when it jumps, it becomes fire. In the cycle of yielding, the fire that comes up returns to the earth. Fire gives birth to the earth. Water becomes a cloud; the cloud returns to the earth when it rains. Wood is succulent when young. As it ages and

dies, it becomes light and dry and it floats; it transforms a caterpillar into a butterfly.

Paulie's background

Paulie started doing yoga at age 14 by watching Richard Hittleman on TV. Next he learned from *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga* by Swami Vishnudevananda of the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Center. In college, he practiced yoga outside on the lawn, while his friend did tai chi. A Kung-fu master from Hong Kong, Cho Chat Ling, who was in the U.S. studying business, saw Paulie. After some time, Master Cho recognized Paulie's potential and decided to take him on as his sole protégé in the secret martial arts he had learned from his uncle. Master Cho came to Paulie's home every day and instructed him for six to eight hours in the Taoist arts of Yin yoga and Chi Kung, as a foundation for his martial arts training, after which Paulie became an internationally acclaimed martial arts grand champion.

After ten years, Paulie showed Master Cho some "flows" (series of postures) he had developed, at which time Master Cho told Paulie he was already a master and that whatever he did was perfect. "Then he quit teaching me," said Paulie. Master Cho now lives on a farm in Thailand.

Yin yoga is an art, not a science

Yin yoga is rooted in an ancient healing tradition that should be personal and



Caterpillar pose, wood element, for ankle, calves, and hamstrings flexibility

different for everyone, Paulie explained. “I have developed it by staying up late and coming up with more flows and movements, and animals and different elemental flows would come to me. It comes to you naturally. You can’t foresee it. It has to flow out of your intuitive heart. It happens not by thinking it but by doing it. All of a sudden you discover something.”

Paulie calls himself an artist who shares his art forms. “I am making it up myself,” he said. “You have to have your own artistic expression. Otherwise you are just maintaining somebody else’s art. It’s good that traditional arts are preserved, but it doesn’t help you as an artist unless you let go of that type of thinking. Art is alive and living and constantly able to change and adapt to change. That’s what we are doing with the energetics—adapting to change, according to the season, weather, and the environment. Then the energy becomes one—you just change from one state to the next. Nothing is lost; it’s just changing.”

Paulie suggests that people choose whatever style of yoga brings the most joy and pleasure to them. Then they will keep doing it for the rest of their life. “That’s why there are so many styles,” he explained. “Some people are very analytical and want to be precise.”

Paulie does not restrict himself to a rectangular mat when he practices. Instead, he slides around on the floor from pose to pose, skitters about on his hands and feet like a bird, lizard, frog, or dog, from caterpillar to butterfly, leaping, flying through the air, rolling from side to side, changing from water to wood to fire.

Before his yoga teaching took off, Paulie worked as a mechanic on British cars. With his agile, slight body, he was able to crawl up inside the hood to work on engines at odd angles for hours at a time.

Paulie ended the workshop with a walking meditation, moving in a circle around the room, incorporating all five of the elements. We took big steps, representing the constant, unchanging

flow of earth energy. We stiffened our bodies, stopping and starting, lunging forward as we exhaled to feel the energy of metal. We felt water energy by moving in a fluid way, bending our spines. To experience wood, we walked with springy steps, swinging our arms in different directions with the breath. For fire, we glided along the floor, feeling light, air, and ungrounded, looking up.

Other teachings from Paulie

- Yin yoga is 99% practice and 1% theory, as Pattabhi Jois, founder of Ashtanga yoga, said. Animals don’t know theory; they just do it. Theory is useful only to explain to others what you are doing, but first you need to move and feel the energy. Otherwise theory can block the energy.

- Your body tightens up when you have gone too far. It is smarter than the mind in that respect by tightening up to prevent you from killing yourself. That’s why the harder you try, the less you achieve.

- Poses are not meant to look a certain way. They are practiced to feel fantastic afterward, not look pretty doing them, although after awhile they might look really pretty. You embody the animals that look good.

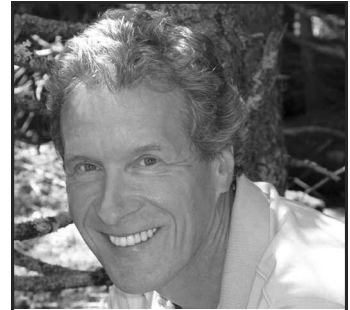
- Ninety percent of yoga—and healing—involves the mind, the way you view yourself and the way you view the world around you.

- Movement is health. To be able to move and flow as we did as children is one of the goals of Yin yoga. The aging body begins to stiffen, tighten, and shrink. Animals move naturally and stay healthy until they die of old age. They stiffen, but not until the end.

- Dogs are brought into hospitals to help the sick improve their emotional state. Change the emotions, change the health. More flow of positive emotions creates a good flow of energy.

Paulie and his wife, Maria, live on 20 acres on the high plains of Montana where Paulie watches the deer, antelope, wild rabbits, and other animals. He feeds the rabbits, and they let him pet their heads. Paulie advises, “Don’t stare at animals. They will feel your eyes and move away. You can hang out with them, but don’t stare.”

Master Paulie Zink returns to Chicago Yoga Center October 19–25. For more information, visit yogamind.com. View Paulie’s website, pauliezink.com, and be sure to watch the five-minute video clip entitled *Yin Yoga Flow to the end* to see Paulie move from sitting on the floor with outstretched legs to standing without bending his knees.



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