

April, 2022, Elaine Tsang's world turned upside down.

She suffered a seizure and was taken to hospital, where she was diagnosed with glioblastoma, the most aggressive and most common type of brain cancer. The prognosis for survival is poor.

Surgeons later removed a grade 4, fast-growing tumour the size of a tangerine.

"The diagnosis came as a shock to me. I had gone with my family to visit the monastery that I grew up visiting as a part of my Buddhist faith," says Tsang, a psychotherapist and former marketing executive, who was born in Hong Kong, grew up in St Louis, and now divides her time between the two cities with her husband.

"There had been signs something was wrong," she says. "I lost my peripheral vision on the right side a year before I was diagnosed and ignored it. I had a blackout in Sheung Wan MTR station a few months before."

Tsang's doctor warned that after surgery there was a chance she would be unable to walk or talk again, and could suffer memory loss.

"I felt numb listening to my doctor while my family tried to make sense of



Elaine Tsang's husband Geoff has been a great source of support.



The practice of gratitude has been my guide when I felt hopeless

ELAINE TSANG

it. I had to make a choice to go forward with the surgery or not," she says.

"I had waited too long to listen to my body, and without the operation it could have been immediate death."

Fortunately, after the operation the only brain damage Tsang has experienced is a 10-second word-recall delay. It takes her 10 seconds to

actually is. She also has neuropathy; sometimes the right side of her body has tremors.

"I was able to walk and talk a few days after surgery, much to my doctor's surprise," she says.

When the mind is calm, the body is calm She credits her Buddhist faith and yoga practice for her recovery. She found renewed strength through both after her ordeal.

A month after the operation, she began concurrent chemotherapy and radiation treatment that lasted for four months. These came with side effects – a loss of appetite, vomiting, diarrhoea, fatigue, severe migraines, headaches and hair loss.

A Buddhist nun encouraged her to shave her head, which she did, and to focus on her Zen Buddhist practice and her return to health.

Tsang's aunt had introduced her to Iyengar yoga, and her grandmother to Zen Buddhism. She began practising both from the age of 18.

"These allowed me to accept my diagnosis with a calm mind, she says.

"When the mind is calm, the body is calm, thereby creating healing cells without fear and anxiety."

She did yoga and meditation every day leading up to the operation.

loving kindness and compassion," she says.

George Dovas, the head of the Iyengar Yoga Centre of Hong Kong where Tsang practices, says her years as a practitioner enabled her "to be sensitive to the effects of the different postures and practise the ones that gave her the most relief".

"When a person is facing a major illness, the practice allows them to be engaged with something that they can do as opposed to can't do, fostering positivity and bringing their mind to the present moment. This also helps with managing the emotions," Dovas says.

In the past two years, Tsang's stamina has grown through her daily yoga practice, and she can do standing poses with the support of a wall.

For 30 to 45 minutes daily, she does a Buddhist meditation that focuses on practising loving kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and peace towards oneself and others.

"This has taught me not to be attached to being the version of myself prior to the diagnosis. Buddhism has made me understand that sickness, ageing, and death are a part of life's natural cycle," she says. "The practice of gratitude has been my guide when I felt hopeless."

collage, dancing and journaling to foster healing. She says the course "helped me to express myself beyond words. It allowed me to rebuild my understanding of my internal and external worlds".

"It gave me a community of women to connect with when I was vulnerable and fragile, and transformed me from being broken to becoming whole again."

Plant-based diet caters to recovery She has switched to a plant-based diet



Art therapy helped Tsang "to express myself beyond words", she says.

settled on a standard of medical care. As a patient she believes in self advocacy.

"I have a choice to make my own decisions. Whenever I felt that my mind and body were not in alignment, I asked the doctor to reduce the duration of my treatment," she says.

Regular doctor appointments with scans every five months or so suggest she is now disease-free. Her doctor encourages her to do exactly what she is doing.

She spends more time in nature, hiking most days with her dog Lady on Violet Hill.

Husband Geoff – the two were married in December 2019 – has been a great source of strength.

"We both made changes to our lifestyles for my recovery and health," she says. "I was able to get through the hardest time in my life with the support of my family, my Buddhist and yoga communities and their prayers for my recovery. Faith carried me through."

"I have learned to be patient and have unconditional positive regard for myself and others," Tsang adds.

"I consciously choose life and love over fear of death. Being truly compassionate to yourself, with all the changes in your life, is the highest expression of your soul."

WELL-BEING

How Wallace Chan's quest for transcendence manifests in his art

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Amid the bustle of the Venice Biennale, jewellery creator and sculptor Wallace Chan finds solace on the steps of the Chapel of Santa Maria della Pietà. Gazing out at Venice's Grand Canal, he radiates a sense of spiritual well-being.

"I live to create," Chan says. "My purpose lies in the act of creation itself."

Spiritual wellness refers to our sense of purpose, meaning and inner peace in life, and a connection to something greater than oneself, which can be religious, philosophical or transcendent in nature.

Hong Kong artist Chan's life purpose – to create enduring artworks that outlive him – finds expression in sculptures crafted from titanium, a material five times harder than steel.

"In the end, everything will fade, and my body will no longer be here. That's why I chose titanium – to me, this is much closer to eternity," the 68-year-old says.

His work *Transcendence*

comprises four 10-metre titanium sculptures suspended from the chapel's ceiling. It is, he says, his attempt to push beyond the confines of space and time, to transform conflicts into opportunities for growth and enlightenment.

"My pursuit always centres on transcending struggle, difficulty, misery and pain," Chan says. "By doing so, one attains a state of calmness and peace. That's the essence of my creations."

Chan grew up in poverty and often went to bed hungry as a child. Despite his humble beginnings, he defied expectations. As an apprentice at a gemstone carving workshop in Hong Kong starting in 1973, he overcame ridicule owing to his background, attire and lack of formal education.

His determination to impress his boss and retain his job fuelled his journey towards artistic mastery. "I had to be good at my work because my work could give me an identity," Chan says. "And then it became a search for skills and knowledge and learning how to communicate with my materials in the years after."

Years of introspection, immersed in his craft, led him to create the Wallace Cut – an illusionary three-dimensional carving technique – in 1987. This process, he says, transcended mere craftsmanship; it was a fusion of mind, heart and hands, as if the very materials ceased to exist – a state of perfect existence.

He sees life divided into an "outer world" – that which you observe and will either attract or repel you – and an "inner world" which is discovered when you look inside yourself. Fully

accessing that second world takes much practice but offers great rewards.

"When you look inward, you are starting to practice, you are starting to control your desires and let go of your desires, and that is when you get your inner strength," Chan says.

In the early 2000s, Chan renounced material possessions and embraced a six-month period as a monk – seen as a defining spiritual transformation.

"When I carved, it felt like an almost religious practice – a dia-

logue between my tools and the raw materials. As a monk, I was able to put what I experienced in words," he says. "I couldn't have expressed it in terms of spiritual reality before."

To help us better develop our own spiritual well-being, we can learn one of Chan's core skills: mindfulness, the practice of present moment awareness.

"You only have this one moment in your hand to make something out of, to build your life on. It is about entering the moment and knowing the value of

your time. If you waste this moment, you can hardly achieve any of your purpose or reach transcendence," he says.

Spiritual well-being may include religious practices, but it is more about a broader sense of purpose, connection and inner peace.

Chan has always embraced both Christianity and Buddhism.

"Both religions have done something to me in my life, making small changes and big changes, so I am always in between these two religions. To me, both church and temple are ... sacred places. I will come into a church with respect and come into a temple with respect," Chan says.

He makes a bold statement about the similarities he sees between the two religions in *Transcendence*. The suspended sculptures are joined by two smaller ones on an altar: one of Jesus and one of Buddha – but Chan has swapped their heads.

"The creative process is a constant process of self-reflection. And it is also constantly looking for purpose and meaning and connection and transcend-

ence. It enhances my spiritual well-being," says Chan, who hopes the exhibition can provide a spiritual art experience, "some sort of spiritual elevation", to the viewer.

A transcendent experience takes us out of ourselves and allows us to connect to something larger, often giving us a greater sense of purpose and meaning.

Whether it is creating art or viewing art, tapping into the calm centre of your being and experiencing the world beyond your daily concerns is a vital component of greater well-being.

We can take some tips about spiritual well-being from Chan, but the life of an artist is not necessarily a well-rounded one. When working on a project, he works long hours, often skipping sleep to spend time with his sculptures.

"As long as I have that, the spiritual well-being, it makes up for working long hours, not eating so well, not sleeping well," Chan says.

Transcendence is on display until September 30 in the Chapel of Santa Maria della Pietà in Venice.



Wallace Chan with part of his work *Transcendence*, featuring sculptures of Jesus and Buddha, whose heads have been swapped around; the Chapel of Santa Maria della Pietà in Venice. Photos: Federico Sutura

