

Questions and Answers from Paul Campbell's Tai Chi Classes

compiled by

Joan Campbell

I have compiled some interesting excerpts from Paul's Wednesday class for everyone to enjoy. I only used material from the Q & A at the end of a few of the most recent sessions.

Joan Campbell

Michael Countryman asked:

It's so much fun and illuminating in so many ways to go through this kind of exercise with your voice as you gently direct our attention and allow for sensations that haven't been familiar. I'm genuinely curious: how did you do this by yourself?

Paul's response:

The good news is I didn't do this by myself in any way, shape, or form. I've been blessed with the most wonderful teachers, and the most wonderful colleagues on the path, while working almost 50 years. I had the blessing of sitting in front of Cheng Man-ch'ing. I had no idea how blessed I was when that happened.

I've also had the enormous blessing of all the Arica Work with Oscar Ichazo and the Arica Institute. So much of the state of being, meditations, and reading the books on how Cheng Man-ch'ing expresses some of the internal processes have been informed by that work also. So, that's been a tremendous blessing.

Ah, the *voice*. I cannot explain that part to you. I have no idea. I didn't even know it was a "thing" until people started talking about my voice.

Fran Snyder asked:

The language that you've been using throughout this class, sinking into the earth and so on, do you use this with beginners?

Paul's response:

There is no contradiction. I spend a lot of time considering; are they having the experience I'm hoping they'll have from what I'm saying? I've had to re-train my mind to think and speak in principle, using words that are attractive.

In Beginning Level, I still say "step out," but not very long after that, I usually start saying; "rather than lifting your leg up and moving it and putting it down, it's easier if you let your leg swing a little and let it down and it'll go where you want, straight to the front, shoulder width."

I need to watch what I say with what they do. I can give them more when I know what I want them to get. This includes not only the accurate indications they need at beginning level, which occupies 90% of the time.

One's tone of voice and rhythm with which one speaks influences which part of their consciousness they hear what is being said to them. If I talk from my head, they'll go into their heads. If I invite them, and talk a little slower, deeper, and if I'm lucky, in a kinder voice, I get better results.

Tai chi is all about attraction rather than opposition. Following them, connecting with them, and seeing what results you get, and then continuing that dance.

Peter Schwartz asked:

From what I'm hearing you say, if I'm in a 70/30 posture with my left foot forward, I could actually be rooting in my right foot?

Paul's response:

Yes, theoretically, that's true, although strategically and technically it wouldn't make sense in general to do that. Patrick Watson would do something like that, occasionally. He'd stand in what looked like 50/50, not move his body and lift his right foot up. He'd put it down, not move his body, and lift his left foot up. I can't do that, but he could.

But, if somebody comes at you quickly and you're in 70/30, you may want to drop your root right into your back leg, absorb it and return it. You can see Cheng Man-ch'ing do incredibly short returns. Energy comes toward him; he gathers it; he returns it. What mastery!

Daphne Shuttleworth asked:

I am getting so much out of your teachings and the comments and questions from classmates. Thank you for encouraging us to speak up and broaden the depth of the gathering that day. Each session is layered with great benefits, insights, shake-ups, curiosities, and paths of explorations to focus on. The videos are good refreshers to return to.

Can you address what we're doing in the cultivation posture and what cultivates?

Paul's response:

That's a tricky question to put into words. If you follow the sequence that both Yang Ch'eng-fu and Professor Chang Man-ch'ing say, "Everything is right here." As you step into the position, Professor states, "stillness." Attention dantien, connected to the stillness.

Let your body show you what upwardly aligned and sensitive to the crown of the head is. Ask internally to be shown what this feels like as a real experience.

Linda Bisberg asked:

When do we first feel "sitting in the hips?"

Paul's response:

You do your initial rooting when you sit down into your right leg after the opening breath. You really don't think about dropping your root until you sit down and go into your low ceiling room. You want to have the feeling that you are sitting down and remain seated for the rest of the form.

A while ago Margaret Olmsted reminded me that Patrick Watson had said that you really begin sitting down (rootedness) as you sink into your low ceiling room. At all times, you can be rooted. But in terms of studying it, establishing it, and doing it, that's the moment when you are sliding down. Any comments, Matsu?

Margaret Matsumoto:

Just checking how it feels in my body. Earlier, there can be a drop into the root, but the logical place for beginning students to both sink physically and energetically is shifting into the low ceiling room.

Bethany Betchel asked:

In Fist Under Elbow, the fist is substantial, guiding the other foot, a really cool thing!

Paul's response:

Look at the timing from Push to Single Whip, the timing of the left hand, how and when it circles. Professor Chang Man-ch'ing says when sending out the arm in Bird's Beak, the leg goes in the opposite direction. In Push to Single Whip, your right arm is supporting your left elbow.

In teaching a lot of beginning and fundamental level classes, it's inevitably static how your arms move in space. You do a lot of stop-action. In higher levels, the left arm is rising as the right elbow is going out and it has a very clear relationship to the right elbow. This allows you to understand the movement and timing more internally. I don't have a full understanding of it as an embodied reality yet. Considering the full body relationship of the timing to movements is fascinating for me, too.

Laurie McCauley asked:

It took me five or six rounds of the Four Corners before I actually experienced the seated hands together with the relaxed calves, and then I lost it. What came to mind is, "This is really something to practice!"

Paul's response:

We're in the stage now that requires long, slow, consistent repetition for the substantial gathering of the chi to where you start to get that more abundant sense of chi in your dantien with everything now all prepared: the Preparation Posture, practice, getting used to the gates being released, the arms unified, quiet breathing, and more. So, this is a threshold point.

Yang Ch'eng-fu was very clear that for effective study of application, you need to have, relative to your own process, a reasonable accomplishment of all the other stages.

Linda Bisberg's comment:

It all comes together, the substantial and insubstantial made me feel like a stool [see below]. This hand supports the other hand, really magical.

Linda explained her three areas of expertise like three legs of a stool as follows:

The first leg of my stool were my 16 years of martial arts with Grand Master Yu, mostly in tai kendo, but also in other forms.

The second leg is as a ceramic artist working mostly on the wheel. My dantian is essential in centering clay on the spinning wheel and being aware and relaxed with my breath as I pull the clay up in a fluid flow into a cylinder.

The third leg were my years as a Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio Interpreter. Walking through his spaces...there is a compression and expansion of spaces as you flow through the houses, like the Four Corners in a way....

I so love your class. I find many wonderful intersections with my other interests and life in general. It's so odd how through the terrible spread of COVID this wonderful online connection became possible.

Paul's comment on the Preparation Posture:

Cheng Man-ch'ing is very clear, and Yang Ch'eng-fu, too, that everything is in the opening posture. All the alignments are there including the alignment to heaven, the open gates, the stillness, and taking the energy up into one's entire being.

Cheng Man-ch'ing told us, "Don't grasp for the exotic. Deal with what's right in front of you."

Paul's final comments:

Invite chi into your dantien; let it spread as a warmth.

Ask your body to show you the experience; pay attention to it.

Ask your mind to be reflective.

Paul Campbell, Eds, LMHC, LMT is both a Mental Health Counselor and Licensed Massage Therapist in private practice. He studied tai chi at Professor Cheng Man-ch'ing's Hall of Happiness in New York starting in 1973 and began teaching tai chi with permission from Patrick Watson in 1976. Paul has led workshops and taught at tai chi summer and winter trainings around the world. He has nurtured and guided apprentice teachers throughout those years.

Joan Campbell, EdS, is a retired Professor of Education and has been practicing tai chi since studying at Professor Cheng Man-ch'ing's Hall of Happiness in New York in 1973. Joan began teaching tai chi with permission from Patrick Watson in 1986.

Joan and Paul Campbell both live and teach ongoing tai chi classes in Gainesville, Florida.

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