

Long River Tai Chi Circle

Taichi Thoughts Internet Journal

****COMPLIMENTARY ISSUE****

The Teaching beyond instruction

"...the deepest level of practice..."

(Wolfe writes:)

"In order to harmonize with the teaching it is necessary to harmonize with the teacher," said Cheng Man-ching. Or so it was translated. Probably the word "harmonize" doesn't go deep enough.

Professor Cheng provided a breadth of instruction in Taichichuan but the real teaching went beyond instruction in position and placement, further even then the presentation of sophisticated principles, like softness, relaxation, investing in loss. There's a sense in which he did not "teach" the deepest level of his practice, nor could he, because that aspect of the teaching did not exist in his words or his actions. It was in his Being.

For instance, though he could be quite expansive and articulate when he lectured in front of a class, most of the time he was characterized by quietude. Initially, I interpreted this reserve as a result of his being unfamiliar with English, but I have come to understand that it didn't have anything to do with any problems with language.

His gung-fu resulted in, and required, that he not indulge the chattering monkey of his ego. He did not feel it was necessary to make polite conversation. Though he enjoyed being around people --he was not reclusive -- he was centered in himself. He practiced the self cultivation of concentrating his chi in the tan-tien. Ed Young points out that the etymology of "self-cultivation" is "repair." To achieve the resiliency of a small child there is no mountain to climb; rather a "repairing" of that which we have blocked or abused.

In recent years I'm occasionally consulted about books on Taichi. Most problematic are the works of fiction, or semi-fiction. Without exception they all have a similar problem. They present images of Taichi in action - the real stuff -- without being able to ground the action in the kind of person capable of those kinds of acts. The writers feel the need to have the story be dramatic but they can't escape an essential paradox: To act masterfully, the hero needs to be a master, which means she wouldn't get into any of the difficulties she has to fight her way out of. Rather than drama, a true Taichi hero would probably present a void.

But what a void.

Position and Principle

"the heel down position...helps deepen the sitting down ...The toe down (has) a rising attitude"...

(A little 3-way correspondence between Dorian, Head Instructor of Long River Toulouse, Patrick, a senior student in Brattleboro, VT and Wolfe:)

(Dorian writes:)

Hi Patrick,

Philippe passed this question on to me, from one of his students, and I don't have the answer, do you?

"Why do we raise the toes off the ground in certain postures instead of leaving the foot rest flat on the ground (like in raise hands and play guitar) ?"

Best wishes,

Dorian

(Patrick replies:)

Hi Dorian,

For a question like this I might simply say to a beginner, "Because my teacher told me to do it that way."

I don't know why in certain 100% postures ("Lift Hands" and "Play Guitar") the heel touches (toes off the ground) or for that matter why in other postures ("White Crane Spreads It's Wings" and "Step Up to Seven Stars") the toe touches (heel off the ground) and further, why the foot remains flat in other postures ("Step Back to Repulse the Monkey" and "Waiving Hands in Clouds")

That said, I think we can surmise the function of the postures through it's principles. For example, in separating the weight back, we are instructed to clearly differentiate the weight (100% / 0%), prior to releasing for the step (99% correct is 100% wrong!) There are numerous places in the form where this release (toes off the ground) is expressed and to release (sink) is key to the propelled motion (shifting, turning, stepping, kicking, etc.) It reflects the classic, "When the foot wants to advance first shift back" and "If there is up there is down."

Well, after all that, it seems the first answer is best and simpler, "Relax...this is how Wolfe teaches it" and the rest will come, gradually, gradually.

Please convey my thanks to the student for asking the question; it helps us all to study the principle a little deeper. And let him/her know that we'll bring it to Wolfe for further reflection.

--Patrick

(Wolfe adds his reflections:)

Patrick has provided some very good thoughts. Since he asked me, I'll add my two cents:

A basic idea that comes to mind is that the heel down position contributes to, helps deepen the sitting down attitude in rear leg postures. The point of contact in the heel is further back than the center of the foot so one can sit down more. The toe down postures have a rising attitude and the toe-touching helps with that; whereas touching the heel would work to bring you down. Also there's a different part of the foot and ankle being exercised in toe, heel or flat foot.

I'd also like to add "Cause that's the way Professor said to do it." So here we have Philippe, Dorian, Patrick, Wolfe and Cheng Man-ching, and on and on it goes. Lineage.

I feel there's a great disadvantage in disconnecting from, or being independent of lineage. You have no one to provide an answer, and -- perhaps more important -- less opportunity to "chew over" the question.

"Knowledge 學問 is Learning 學 to Ask 問"

"How and What to ask is significant."

(Wolfe writes)

Some issues ago we addressed a student's complaint that too much class time was being spent in Q & A. Ed Young's etymological analysis of Chinese characters has shed considerable light on the question of questions, and answers.

The Chinese character Knowledge is made up of the characters Learning and Ask. So - as a possibility - Knowledge 學問 is Learning 學 to Ask 問. Professor Cheng elaborated on the character/idea: How and What to ask is significant.

A student of maturity and depth in traditional Chinese culture is aware of the difference in the quality of questions. Rather than blurt out the first thing that comes to mind, the good student is expected to chew the question over, to digest it. Ideally, when the question emerges, it is in the spirit of the student's verifying what they have come to understand.

The mature student expresses his worth in how well he has prepared the question, and also how well the question is an expression of the position he has established. His place in the study. Incidentally, the class provides other students with a similar opportunity, to listen and think about how they would answer the question, and then compare that answer with the teachers'.

Of course, Western and traditional Chinese culture is very different in this regard. In the west students are often encouraged to challenge and to argue. As Cheng Man-ching's translator, Ed would sometimes soften a question, helping Professor Cheng remind himself of the potential lack of maturity of the questioner, as well as their lack of understanding of their Place. Without that "reminder," Professor Cheng could occasionally be a bit sharp: "Is that a serious question?"

It's also worth noting that Ed points out a certain significant relationship between two characters:

Asking 問 is made up of the character Door 門 and Mouth 口.

Hearing 聞 is made up of the character Door 門 and Ear 耳.

And both characters have the same sound.

THE FULL CUP

"...readiness to start as a 'beginner,'..."

(Wolfe writes:)

Over the years my experiences as a teacher have caused me to think about the parable of the Full Cup. There are many versions of the story. One has a scholar of Zen visiting a Zen master for the purpose of gaining instruction. They sit down over tea and the scholar declares that he would like to be taught but, by way of introduction, he begins to regale the master with the depth of his own study and understanding of Zen. The master sits quietly, then starts to pour tea for his guest. The scholar is very involved in his presentation but he finally notices that his cup is full and the master has continued to pour the tea until it overflows the cup, and onto the table and the floor.

"What are you doing?" the scholar cries. "My cup is already full."

"Which is the problem that I would have trying to teach you. Unless your cup is empty there is no room for you to receive instruction."

Occasionally, a visitor comes with a full cup, replying to a suggestion of mine with some version of "But my teacher doesn't do it that way." However, much more often there are students who, though they can have significant experience with a good teacher in our lineage, are willing to stand in the back of a beginners' class for months. Recently, I put such a student back there where he was completely open to the differences between Long River and his previous teacher. After a time, he diffidently asked if he could also join the advanced form class. I said, "Sure," and then forgot about him again. When I finally remembered and invited him into the Sensing Hands class, I told him that, though I'd never met his previous teacher, I could have no better introduction than what "You provided by your openness as a student."

(A wee digression:)

How many Taichi students does it take to change a light bulb?

Ten. One to change the bulb and the other nine to stand around saying, "Yes, but in my school we do it just a little bit differently."

As far as the question of "Whose interpretation is correct?" The answer could be Neither? Both? Taichi

is not about "correct." It's a process of deepening understanding of what is infinite and of such depth that it can never be more than partly understood. Or as Chuang Tzu said, "The understanding that rests in what is not understood is superior."

(After Ed Young and I discussed "The Full Cup," he sent along the following:)

On the occasion of the 50th year of the Tai Chi Chuan Study Group in New York City's Chinatown, this student ponders the wisdom of Professor Cheng's decision to assign six assistants to run the school during his absence from N.Y.C.

The posts lasted long enough to create a culture of diversity which allowed the students to experience interpretations of the Taichichuan principles from six entirely different viewpoints. In spite of the fact that personal ambitions and ego eventually caused a splitting up of the Chinatown school, this culture continues to be a distinct character of our greater school to this day.

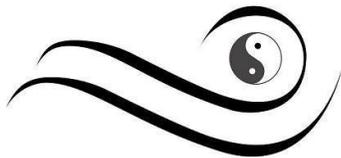
For me, the nature of a good student resides in his readiness to start as a "beginner," no matter how advanced he has come from years of pursuit of the Taichi principles, and that the real purpose of any learning is to allow the vessel of self-knowledge to increase from the source itself.

Ed Young
10-10-14

End of Taichi Thoughts Complimentary Issue

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