

## Maggie Newman: On Not Squelching the Students Spirit

*Maggie Newman, summer faculty member for many years, worked with Master Cheng Man-ch'ing and carries on his teaching. She has been instrumental in building the gap between t'ai chi and meditation practice, and has been exploring interdisciplinary directions with other faculty.*



**T**he beginning student is involved with the discipline of learning the Tai chi form. Through the shape of each movement he works with *chi*, the energy or life force of the body. The body's shape and chi are the same thing; its form is an expression of chi.

The shape of t'ai chi movements are round, without breaks. Since the body's chi can escape through the joints, they are never extended to their full straightness. Then the energy can be received from the air, move through the body into the ground, circle up into the feet, legs, waist and hands, nourishing the organs of the body and revitalizing their energy.

Someone's out-of-kilter shape is an expression of the energy within that person's body -- that somewhere there is too little energy, somewhere the chi is blocked and cannot flow through the breaks the body in a circular path.

Beginning students interfere with the energy; they don't know where to put their bodies, they have no tools to work with. This situation is approached externally; they are given the physical tools, the form, that has the potential of embodying the principles of tai chi ch'uan. It seems as if, in asking the student to put on an external form in the beginning, he or she may feel that his or her creativity or spontaneity is not involved. But his creativity is not resisting the form. He has to find a way to find freedom through this discipline. And with the teacher guiding, he can make the adjustments necessary so that the form becomes workable. I have the image of the beginner hitting the sides of the walls of the form in frustration until he decides not to resist and be at home there. By not demanding perfection, letting him experience his body as it is, one doesn't squelch the spirit.

To make the proper corrections, I have to have a sense of what the student needs at any particular point. Demonstrating and making clear the principles of t'ai chi will not harm him, but if I am too specific in how to make the principles work, it might put the student out of kilter. I will not demand that the student be too specific about the form, not demand too much technique too early, but give him as much external structure as he can handle, so that some stability, some security through the structural soundness of his body is experienced: that his feet are on the ground. It is important that he not violate that structure but realize that he can stay within its limits without squelching his spirit. If he tries to violate this structure he will be in trouble.

The corrections at the beginning stage are to be made are to make the form workable so the student can practice. For example, his form might be too low; then I would ask him to come up higher so that he can be more connected to the ground. What he is done is to take the principle, sinking into the ground too far. Or student might be too straight, too stiff, and I would work to have him keep in mind that t'ai chi also has to do with being round, rooted, grounded. Being connected to the ground is one of the first principles that will give him some balance and security, so I have to help him get in touch with that in a physical way. I must be aware to what extent each student can relax with that connection, or else I might put him in a position of breaking this groundedness.

In my relationship with the student there must be some openness, some space; he must be allowed room to flounder, the space to discover things himself and not have it imposed from the outside, from me. That way his spirit will not be squelched.

The correction student is at the next level of Tai chi practice; he has developed some security in the form, some success. This might carry him into arrogance, pride, some puffing up of ego. So, the

corrections have to do not only with form, structure, but also asking the student to look at his mind, his motivations, to take this responsibility as part of his training.

This is where further spontaneity and creativity come in, because we are no longer working completely with external form. As inspiration, the correction student can use the classics and philosophy of t'ai chi. With this inspiration, he begins to share the responsibility with the teacher in working with internal energy and his interference with it. At this stage he has to look at himself more completely. He begins to observe, to sharpen his awareness of how he practices the form. He cannot look only at the physical aspect anymore, since his form carries attitudes he himself has been carrying all the time in which interfere with the continuous energy flow through the body -- with the ability of the body to receive energy from air and ground. He creates some kind of holding or resistance.

For example, his form might have an overlay of anger, of self-righteousness, or pride. This is what the student should begin to look at -- not particularly to do anything about. This is brought out after lots of corrections have already been made and students have explored physical form to a certain degree. Not using force, being soft and relaxed have been principles the student has worked with from the beginning. Now he can be encouraged to use these principles when another area of his stuckness.

This has to do with my role. For example, I will make observations. I might ask the student to consider the overlays on his form; that he is not coming to the shapes freshly. That, in a sense he is going to sleep for a while -- sleeping in the comfort of his form. I will say to him, "stay awake, and you'll see what's getting in the way." Sometimes I do this with a sense of humor, kiddingly. But for the most part I will ask him to discover what he is doing. Wanting students to change is my frustration as a teacher. Insisting they change would be squelching their spirit.

After this student has learned the form and been in correction for adequate length of time, having attained some balance and awareness of his own energy, he may begin study push hands (t'ui shou) in which he has a relationship with another person. As described by Master Cheng Man-ch'ing.\*<sup>1</sup>

*The basic idea is light adherence; no letting go and no resistance. The partners keep their hands and continuous light touch while executing different movements. Each opponent is guided purely by the sense of touch which "detects" the other one's next move before it takes place. One yields at the partner's slightest pressure and sticks to him with his slightest retreat. One's palms are, so to speak, weightlessly glued to the partner's like a shadow to its object or an echo to the sound. Thus the exercises are gone through, over and over until one feels and anticipates almost by instinct the opponent's every movement, when one may be said to have arrived at the gate of mastering the "out-reaching hand." One is then ready for understanding the art of "interpreting strength." When one can so interpret, one has gone through the front gate and arrived at the parlor of t'ai chi ch'uan.*

Push hands, then, is like a mirror that reflects the student; he is now in the middle of a relationship. The student finds that he is not quite as balanced, as calm as he thought he was; that he has hard spots, and can be pushed easily, and has certain reactions to it. I would like the student to observe these feelings as part of the learning material. If he has such an irritated heart he will not be able to cope with the physical situation.

Often the students of push hands have a desire to avoid a particular relationship; they don't want to play with a particular person. I don't want them to avoid the people that push their buttons, so that they seek out only those who make them comfortable, with whom they can harmonize, blend. Yet at the same time, I won't insist that they play with everybody all the time. But working only with those with whom one is comfortable tends to bring up the attitude in such partners that, "we're in harmony we're practicing right, and they are wrong." One can get away with the reality of the situation. The business of right and wrong has to be thrown away.

Within the framework they have, students of push hands are asked not to use force. This takes such a high level of skill that few can do it. There is a tendency to put blame on the other person. There is the

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\* The t'ai chi ch'uan faculty at Naropa Institute teaches the shory form as taught by Master C-ch'ing, heng Man

attitude that someone else is not playing by the rules. I try to get a student to accept responsibility for whatever happens in the push hands relationship, for any clash that might occur -- not to fall into the attitude that it's someone else's fault.

So correcting the body is not the answer completely. Yet technique cannot be short circuited; it has to be there. When you've practiced for years and it's still not working, the student has to discover what else is interfering. The physical situation is opened up.

For example, I recently had a student that I have been correcting over and over again in a particular way broke into tears. I pushed her and she reacted in an emotional way. This was good material for the push hands class. Another student observed how she yielded during push hands and saw it as a metaphor for many aspects of her life. She came to class and asked what alternative there was for her when someone invaded her space -- must she yield continuously? The class became involved in this too.

I'm often asked how to deal with energy situations, with aggressive situations. It is not possible to say exactly what you will do. And you do not know how much your practice will help; you might just panic and flip out. But I have great trust that the practice will help, providing you have not neglected to look at heart and mind, as well as body. If you haven't considered the fluctuations of heart and mind, haven't made that part of your training, the technique will be useless.

Sometimes a student wants to come in and study push hands right away. He's been intimidated and wants a powerful tool to use against whatever threatens him. With that attitude he's going to be fighting me and anyone he comes in contact with from the first step onward. So I try to guide him into some kind of interest in relaxing and first finding some solid ground -- in bringing his attention back home.

There can be spontaneity within the form of t'ai chi, and this is expressed differently by students at different levels, as we saw earlier. What I mean by spontaneity is the freedom of acting without putting an overlay of one's habitual reactions on a situation, without interfering with it. Sticking with what's happening. In t'ai chi language we often use that word, *sticking*. In olden times, men who had developed this quality had almost supernatural powers. It's hard to get a student to work on sticking. They want to do something. There's not enough exploration of sticking, of not having ideas about what should happen. Of sticking with what's happening.

In the form class, sticking means following the teacher, staying together with the group -- a sense of having one's back with the person who's leading the form: doing it with them, as opposed to having your own mind about when you're going to do it.

In terms of touching someone in push hands practice, sticking is not being outside and separate from your partner, yet not creating pressure on him either. Having the right substantiality to blend with that person's energy, mind. Being alert in mind and body so that one is with the person at every moment. Not having any preferences. We say it's also knowing how your partner is going to move and getting there before he does.

T'ai chi ch'uan is not the study of developing tools and power to do something with, so one can have a lifetime of security. It's a daily practice of discovering one's self and one's world.