



The Popping, The Fluttering (And Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh My)

by Amy Tyksinski

I have been thinking a lot lately about the “concepts” that we bring to T’ai Chi Chih practice. From a certain perspective, every single word we say not only passes through our own level of understanding and layers of conditioning in a given moment but can only be digested by another through a lens of *his/her current* level of understanding and layers of conditioning.

From another perspective, words are completely irrelevant in this mutual transmission give-and-take.

Justin was a very mysterious teacher in some ways. He rarely gave a direct answer about anything. He left it to each one of us to plumb the depths of T’ai Chi Chih within our own framework of understanding in a given moment. And yet, he always pointed an arrow (“Follow the pointing arrow,” he would say, and then would add, “Most people miss it!”)

When observations arise like, “My fingers don’t flutter when I do the movements,” or “People from Albuquerque stand up after holding the Resting Pose for a few seconds and I find that to be disruptive/distracting,” we are left with a curious challenge as a community. How can we meaningfully dialog about these questions without alienating one another? How can we participate fully together as we explore and share and allow and also recognize we are all at different places in our development in any given moment?

How can we love *ourselves* exactly where we are, regardless of what is going on around us, yet still remain open and receptive?

One approach would be not to address the questions at all, as any answer is bound to polarize and potentially distance us from one another. Justin frequently in his teaching would not only NOT answer questions, he would give different answers to different people in response to an identical question.

Another approach might be to rest a little longer in the discomfort of the questions and see what happens to the questioner in the end...

At our weekly Tuesday morning Teacher Practice in Albuquerque, Justin stood up in between the movements. And so I started doing this, too. At first it was quite odd and I resisted it. When I moved to Albuquerque, I had had about 8 years by that point of holding the Resting Pose in between movements and had no muscular difficulty in doing so. It felt disjointed and irritating to me to stand up in between and be so seemingly “casual” about it. But gradually over time, I began to model myself after what I observed Justin doing. And gradually, I came to change my “mindset” (the stories I was telling myself as well as what I “thought” my body should feel or was feeling). I put the old way down for just a few moments on that Tuesday practice to participate as fully as I could with Justin.

I have found standing up in between movements now to be invaluable. For me, there is a point in the Graceful Conclusion or Resting Pose where completion or consolidation occurs. This happens after holding it for about 3-5 seconds. After that moment, I no longer need to stay in the Resting Pose as I find in my body that “staying” becomes “extra”. This “extra” is not muscular tension or even mental tension. The best way to describe it is simply extra (almost dead, in fact, no longer alive). Standing up in between movements no longer disrupts me. In fact, it has simplified and allowed a deeper connection with the whole of the practice even more than before.

So, another question to ask might be, “Is it possible that standing up in between movements might enhance an experience of wholeness, though not from a place that I originally could have comprehended prior to being exposed to the possibility?” ***It doesn't always look/feel like we think it is supposed to!!!***

Blunt words about the Finger Flutter

Let's face it. It is really uncomfortable when something that Justin has said is a “confirming sign of the flow of the ‘chi’” is happening to others around us and it isn't happening to us. We think we're doing something wrong. We think we're failing. We beat ourselves up and then sometimes even try to make others wrong, too. We're told to tell our students, “If you aren't feeling warmth, tingling or trembling in your hands, don't worry. The ‘chi’ is circulating anyway!” Why should they believe us?

How patient can we be with ourselves in moments like these? How lovingly can we coax and invite the “chi” to speak to us? How heavy is the heavy air through which we are flowing? What substance do we notice is truly there between the palms or felt by the hands and entire body (inside and out) as it traverses slow motion in a dream? How rooted can we be in the soles of the feet through it all?

I personally have gone through multiple iterations of involuntary and extreme finger fluttering and hand flapping to a more gentle tumbling (at this point) these last 20 years of practicing T'ai Chi Chih. I appreciate and remember when Justin admonished me firmly at one practice, as I looked pleadingly at him to make it stop: "Focus in the soles of the feet!"

I was not grounded when my hands were pulsing and my fingers were going wild. But now (though honestly I still work on staying grounded every day as it is a big challenge for me), with my fingers tumbling quietly and even not moving at all sometimes, there is a more spacious vastness inside. If I could venture to observe, the "chi" is circulating and yet anchored downward, rather than circulating and flowing up and outward. But the wild hand flap-flutter was a phase I had to go through, too.

I share my experience and I share my questions. May these serve as an invitation.

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