

## CAN PUSH HANDS BE COMPASSIONATE?

If the beginner student perseveres, Push Hands classes will eventually appear on the menu.

**PAT GORMAN**, a senior teacher of Push Hands, outlines her view of this aspect of T'ai Chi practice.

**PUSH HANDS.** The words annoyed me because I couldn't understand them; I didn't get it. In those early days, when Professor Cheng taught in New York, everybody talked about 'getting it.' Patrick Watson brought me to Push Hands classes at Shr Jung, Professor Cheng's school but I found the classes disorienting. Why was everyone pushing and shoving each other next to a wall? If they wanted to defeat someone, why not really let 'em have it and be done with it? Even more confusingly, moments of seemingly serious struggle gave way to laughter, sharing of insights and a change of partners, followed by more struggle. A dance from outer space—or inner space, as I later realized.

Patrick would have people push on me. "Don't resist," he'd whisper in my ear. As a consequence I went over easily, with no struggle. After a while his admonitions changed to, "Stay in principle and get out of the way," whatever *that* meant. So not resisting grew into getting away. Still no struggle, but mysterious feedback. "She's resisting in the knees, Patrick." What did that mean? I could hardly feel my knees, let alone know that I was resisting from them.

One of the great achievements of Professor Cheng was the combining of Push Hands—the martial arts application of T'ai Chi—with the viewpoint of an enlightened being and healer. T'ai Chi and Push Hands became a true path to consciousness, as well as encouraging the restoration of the body and the relaxing of the emotions. In previous times, (even with Professor Cheng's teacher, Yang Cheng-fu) the quality of compassion was hard to discern as the Professor was, by his own account, knocked unconscious over and over again, until he no longer presented resistance to his teacher.

How can Push Hands be a path to health and consciousness? How can it be compassionate? I've witnessed almost every senior student of Professor Cheng's do Push Hands, and had almost all of them push on me. Each of them embodied the Professor's spirit, which was gentle and instructive. I was saved many hard knocks by not offering

force. This part was Patrick Watson's doing. When force or resistance—the yang and yin sides of the same coin—are offered, the player has several options.

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**To not oppose the force, or attack the resistance; instead, unify with what is being offered.**

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When one is sensitive even to the pulsing of a partner's contracted muscle, there is still lots of room to move and keep things going. Eventually the person expending all that effort to attack (and finding nothing to fall upon) or resisting (when there is nothing to resist) becomes tired and may even feel a bit foolish. This is analogous to mounting an attack of some sort in real life and then have the person you are attacking show you true warmth and openness. Or getting all prepared for an attack that never comes by anticipating the worst and readying your armour, but then it never happens. Recently I saw someone get tremendously agitated because they thought they'd got a parking ticket. It thoroughly distracted them: they got angry at the city and at life itself. The ticket under the windshield wiper turned out to be an advertisement. All that energy for nothing.

And so in Push Hands if you neither attack or resist, the other person gets a chance to see what *they* are doing, without your interference.

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**To completely unify with your "opponent" so they are no longer an "opponent."**

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If I follow each move adhering lightly, sticking to my partner, he or she truly become my partner and not the *opposition*. The element of fun and playful sensation enters, almost no matter how "stuck" the other person is—physically, emotionally, mentally or in their spirit. A smile or an "aha" will emerge as the quality of spirit changes and the psyche wakes up. Patrick Watson used to say, "When two masters meet, it looks like nothing is happening" because each is in unity with the other's every move."

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**To start after, and arrive before.**

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Simple words; a world of complex variation. Being receptive, following, I can *hear* through the points of contact (palms, elbows, etc.) the slightest impulse to move or to direct. Professor Cheng would say "I can hear your liver thinking"; Patrick Watson would say, "Your thoughts are too heavy." When one really gives up one's own agenda, it becomes clear how the other person is trying to unbalance us or capture our energy. At the first sign of their intention, we "start after," having heard where they want to go, and "arrive before," getting out of the way of their intended direction without letting them feel *our* change, thus letting them trap themselves in an untenable situation of

their own making. The Tibetans would say that this teaches responsibility for one's every action. There is the opportunity at this point, having gotten out of the way of their force, to use no more than four ounces (heavier than this would be pushing *ourselves*) to help them realize their goal, and go where they have aimed. We spare them the consequence of actually pushing on us by not being where they are aiming, so the only responsibility they have is to experience going where they have selected with the speed and force they have applied.

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### Returning Energy

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Here is the carrot the ego constantly chases. "Oh, if only I could just take this person who is so heavy, pushing me, and give it back to him, slam him to the wall!" Once this thought takes hold, we have descended to the level of "opponent" ourselves. The Catch 22 of Push Hands is that unless the first three points are at least partially mastered the fourth point is only a trap for the ego. "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here!" One cannot *return* one's partner's energy (that return being essentially circular in nature, a continuance, not an opposition) if one *opposes* one's partner! There's the koan. As repellent as it may be to the ego, one must first know how to blend with, unify and stick with the other person in order to recirculate their energy.

So at this point we are challenged to recognize an essential truth: that we are one. One being, one consciousness, manifest as myriad beings with myriad "personal" experiences, yet essentially aspects of the same "one." If this awareness is awake in us at the moment when returning energy is possible, we become a vehicle for the universe (the *one*) to provide a reminder to our partner if they are out of balance (attacking or resisting, collapsing or running away). Of course, mostly we are on the receiving end of these lessons as our teachers attempt to show us how we are "lost" if we rely on the other person to provide a "shelf" for us to lean on, a "wall" to push, or be someone we can manipulate or knock over—these are all positions essentially out of balance, in Push Hands or in real life.

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### Changing in the moment

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As an acupuncture practitioner, sometimes I have to help a patient see their area of weakness, or make them aware of how they invite illness into their lives by being out of balance. But I must also be ready to stand back and let the patient surprise me by getting their own balance together, having their own insights and setting their direction. Each person has his or her own path back to the one.

Returning energy in Push Hands lets our partners see how they are out of balance, but this can change in a moment as they wake up and take responsibility for their actions, then we can easily change places so the "teacher" can become the "student." This keeps our egos soft and pliable and our spirit open to change. Professor Cheng had several nicknames, one of which Tam Gibbs (Professor's translator) paraphrased as "Child of Constant Learning," because he was always open to the interchange of teaching and learning, yin and yang. The Professor's nickname for Patrick Watson was "Baby Elephant"—a comment on his size and the delicacy of balance elephants are known for, but also for the alert learning ability of a baby. Babies have no preconceived notions: they notice what's happening every moment and respond to it in the moment. What Push Hands has to offer us is this innocence, this return to *being in the moment*, which is infinitely more fun and instructive than were my first thoughts of "let 'em have it and get it over with"!

So if Push Hands is new to you, rejoice in being in Professor Cheng's lineage of compassion: the use of Push Hands as a tool of consciousness, gently taught, where the teacher feels responsible for the health of the students, and the students gradually learn to take responsibility for their actions in the world. ◆