

## Questions and Answers

**A selection of questions and answers over the years from John's classes, workshops, and e-mails. These may be informative regardless of training with John or his Teachers. Please see available books and other web sites for greater depth and more information. Views expressed below are John's and may not accurately express his Teachers methods or explanations.**

**Miscellaneous {questions that fitted into no particular individual category or more than one}**

### ***1. Do you need to follow any particular diet in Yoga, Chi Kung, or Tai Chi?***

Its a personal thing, but after many years of experimentation I'd say for most who are healthy, no its not necessary. In Tai Chi few seem to, in Yoga many do, however its still a matter of personal preference.

One of the first questions asked when I was in my first tai chi class with Chu King Hung was whether you needed to follow a particular diet or take vitamins. He laughed. Told us to eat what ever we wanted and we didn't need to take vitamins, they were a waste of money. However my Yoga Teacher was and is a vegetarian, if not vegan, as were most of his peers and his teacher. The Dali Lama was vegetarian until his physician suggested he ate some fish as his work load was exhausting his body. I started eating meat when my homeopath {my only physician at present} suggested the same thing.

I've tried virtually every food philosophy from veganism to macrobiotics, food combining, and more recently the blood group diet. All have merits and drawbacks. Food has become another obsessive quality and form of control of the neurotic western world. When your poor, food is JUST food, regardless of its source or quality, or whether is allowed according to some ethical permission. No one who is truly hungry or starving can be that choosy. To some now if an article isn't hand picked by organic cotton clad virgin nuns uttering holy verses while skipping through hand reared daisies fed with glacier water, they wont eat it, even if it costs the same as an average persons weekly food bill! Its food fascism, and no better than an elitist obsession with fine wines priced beyond any logic or reason should dictate. The package, not the contents, is what many buy fixated on the 'idea' of things rather than the fact. This kind of approach is another way that causes terrible jealousies and isolationism. Buts that my opinion, Im biased, I think we should all have enough high quality food to eat.

As the founder of macrobiotics wisely pointed out 'the west is over fed and under nourished', or in other worlds you are not what you eat but what you assimilate. Many have problems assimilating the nourishment form food. I offer that is also a great way to look at anything that we take into our bodies- food, water, thoughts, philosophies, ideas, images etc. What can you assimilate,

what is indigestible. Again its all personal. Sensible eating habits without extremes is a best all round tonic for most. Undigested anything is toxic.

I would also agree with the buddhist approach to accept humbly what's on offer at a meal, or market, without discrimination, but that if you need to work on compassionate qualities in your life you may need to be vegetarian. Many people make themselves very ill mentally and physically following diets not suited to their needs. The Blood group diet is very interesting, look into it if your diet isn't working for you. Its what I presently follow as a base, plus what I can afford.

## ***2. Do you need to follow any particular philosophy to train in Yoga, Chi Kung, or Tai Chi?***

No not really. It can help to be open minded and not fixated about why you want to train and what you wish to achieve. Preconceptions can be accurate, but often they are limited and not helpful.

Most of us have some kind of 'life approach' and attitude that we develop within our peer groups or society in general. Acceptable behaviour in one group can be unacceptable in another. Whether its just your friends or family, or something more organised, political, secular or religious based. I suggest its good thing to realise that everything we do is based on intent {in buddhism the view 'everything is/originates in the mind'}, and its a pretty good thing to clear up what our individual intent is in everything we do, regardless of what idea or system we think we believe or follow. That's whether we deem that important or unimportant , or whether we are actually aware that we are following a line of thought that we possibly did actually not formulate.

In terms of training be clear as soon as possible what you wish to or need to learn or why you're in a class, whoever or whatever you're training with. Children don't have to be clear like this, they are necessarily involved in massive bouts of development and experimentation. Adult students should see it as part of the training to gain clarity, and like a child go through new periods of development and change. 'Be but a child unto God' in the Bible and 'return to the flexibility of a child' in the Tao te Ching can be seen as pointing to this. My Yoga teacher Shiv always told new comers 'I don't know why you're here' the subtext was you need to find out why you are there. The teacher takes you as you are in that moment there and then.

Philosophies like religions are often just impressive belief patterns that have no bearing on the individuals relationship with how they really feel, or what they need, but how they'd like to feel, others to see them etc, or the world to be. Teenagers change their philosophies on life as quickly as they change fashions. Adults fare a little better but can revert to the child state residing themselves to rigid fixed ideals and rigid belief patterns, and make a real song and dance about it when the world or others fail to live to their ideals or philosophies. Id risk also saying religions. Stamping their feet and huffing and puffing no differently than

when a child doesn't get their way is pretty daft and funny when it has no consequences but is disastrous when it does. Fortunately most children don't have the access to power {for instance guns}, unfortunately most adults who do are still emotionally children.

### ***3. Why did you get into making films of you doing Tai Chi, Chi Kung, and Yoga, it seems a bit self involved for such arts?***

Oh how often I've asked myself that! Primarily I'm an artist and the nature of being creative is its not always logical, nor follows a linear based thought pattern. For instance 'do this that will happen'. There were primary reasons to film and ones that later developed.

I needed to send footage to Erle Montague for feed back from 2001 onwards, so that motivated me to film myself regularly. Before that I'd helped my teacher Rupert Shonaike on a film he made on his Tai Chi in 1999, as his assistant on camera. That inspired me with his encouragement to look at making my own as I had some creative ideas. Up until then I wasn't even in to having my picture taken doing tai chi or martial arts. There's only a couple photos of me pre 1999 doing tai chi i know of. A few aikido and wing chun ones friends took some too, but i haven't seen those for over twenty years, so they're prob lost.

I used to be in the fashion industry in the 80's as a clothes horse {model for want of a better word}, so i d happily left all that tastelessness and image self obsession well behind me. Fortunately out of that though I learnt a lot about working in front of a camera and i trained afterwards also to be a photographer. Now there's an excessive amount of pictures of me, and footage to boot. My Yoga teacher made it clear that films I made should be instructive and uplifting rather than either just functional or nice to look at.

Its been much more work than I intended. Sleepless nights , computer crashes, expense in more than just money {damaged relationships}, a steep slope of learning, shooting and editing with in the beginning the most primitive of low grade equipment and software. The upside were the 'road trips' around california, europe, and the UK, being in some truely beautiful, simply magical and naturally energised locations. Hopefully some of that comes across and inspires others to get out there too. Its still a uncommon to find people training out doors, I hope that changes. I had it in my head also like Rupert that there wasn't any thing out there really visually interesting or beautiful to inspire and also help people to do Tai Chi. It would be great if more ventured outside to practice, whether that's in gardens, public parks, or wilderness areas.

Erle has done vids his ramshackle way since the 80's, but he doesn't care much about pretty scenes, which is refreshing, but that possibly only appeals to those already converted to the 'tai chi way'. I'm an artistic type, which has both its advantages and

disadvantages. I have a different but neither superior or inferior perspective and vision.

I started filming in 2001 pre even digital photography, pre You tube, and the mass of visual media content now available. I didn't even own my own video camera back then, and it was all analogue. Amazing how far the tech has come in only ten years. My fist mac could barely edit what I asked of it- took hours to render a few minutes of footage. For those of who only know the world as a You tube generation, before we all this the only other Tai Chi films around were either the amateur mainly badly shot, with backgrounds of front rooms and pot plants, or the even worse professional vids, some with fake studio zen gardens complete with plastic lanterns, plants, and the dear departed but misguided david carridine. The worse were the naked Tai chi vids, and the one where they were all dressed up like something from star trek, clingy suits the lot!

Id still like to film in some other locations, including china, but i don't know if that will happen, have to see. Can drive you nuts editing yourself, I wouldn't recommend that, don't know how Erle does it, prob his sons do the most now. In the future I may concentrate on projects for others performance's or a completely different genre.

Its def the 'journey' of filming and not the 'destination' that's been the most interesting and rewarding. For that I'd recommend it, if it helps others learn something that ones up there too.

#### ***4. You mentioned something called a USP- what's that?***

Knowledge as a product at a 'price' or with a 'USP' {unique selling point} is and always has been rife in Chinese Arts, everything now is saturated with it. Its an unavoidable bug bear in the world now, not that I like it.

The chinese saying 'every business man is a crook' from a culture in love with money is particularly apt and insightful.

Personally there's in my mind difference between earning a reasonable 'crust' and there's living it up excessively on your takings. One of my old teachers got into being paid with very expensive antiques for various reasons. His USP was lineage disciple of Yang Family. Made him very rich. I can't see the appeal personally of drowning in shiny objects, but there may have been reasons I cant understand {tax reasons was one apparently} or fathom. Why these people get so obsessed with money and gain is warned against in Taoism, I can see the appeal to living this way, but its strange when some say they are taoists. Oh well many paths to the Tao etc as Taoism states.

Its not uncommon for experts or masters to have many failings,including quite poor people skills. This includes the ancients. As

then as today they have often been drunks or worse, limiting the ravages of their chosen tippie with their practices. It seems just silly to many, myself included to waste their accumulated wisdom and chi on this way of life but we can never walk in someone else's shoes, so its too easy to judge. This can also be part of their projected mystique though, another USP, and that is just frankly something many teachers would find abhorrent. Maybe they are kidding themselves thinking they can get away with it, but we all have personality traits we'd probably prefer we didn't. If they need that to relax though their maybe something is deeply wrong with their practice. Many are not very happy individuals. I'm glad I got it out of my system along time ago.

We all have our agendas and faults, karma known or unknown. Wise or unwise we all sit round the same fire side. Its pretty funny but awful doing Tai Chi drunk or worse. I did it drunk and on various drugs as a kid as an experiment. It was so terrible, so crap its one of the reasons I stopped taking them and cleaned up my act.

As for my USP- I don't know what it is I don't think I have one I hope. Not intentionally anyway. I've concluded though that I'm not a great tai chi/yoga 'business/sells man' it doesn't mix well with me.

***5. Some teachers write and talk beautifully, while in person I find them really rude and condescending. Why is this, I find it really off putting! They don't seem very 'Spiritual' to me at all.***

'Beautiful words are not true, true words are not beautiful' is the Taoist reply to that- its from the Tao Te ching. I have to agree in part. The Chinese or Chinese taught can be both ends of the pleasant/unpleasant spectrum and somewhere in between. Being true to your words is very much a challenge for any one teaching, a prime statement mantra in the yoga i learnt was Sat Nam- that is 'truth in the name', 'my name is truth' or 'i identify with truth'. Now what's truth in these terms, well maybe its the ultimate truth beyond human construct, laws, and even personality.

If the teacher is good at what they do try and put up with their rudeness, which I have had to do too on many occasions. If not leave, it maybe too counter productive to stay. Some who act and talk beautifully or are real bullies, teach nothing really worth while, and can even be out right con artists. Lots of us want spirituality to be like warm milk and cookies while being gently smothered in boxes of cute kittens! Fraid its invariably more a cold grey monday morning in english drizzle, you're cold, your feet are wet, and you missed your bus/train kind of experince. In other words you get really tested even with good teachers. Now if you find someone smiling while that's going on and they're not mad, that's prob your teacher right there in front of you!;-}

***6. You talked about different training at different points in life, and seasonal aspects. Can you elaborate?***

Well for, instance, neither you or I are teenagers now so we wont if we are wise train like one. For a teenager to train or be taught like a middle aged person is often just plain daft, and can be highly counter productive. Tai Chi and Yoga instructors need to really be aware of this. Few know the difference unless they started training when they were young.

In our youth we need to move and express our vitality, our energy, as the body changes from child to adult. It moves out from the sacral region and spreads throughout the body like a growing tree {the 'tree of life'- its a metaphor found in so many doctrines}. Its a naturally sexualised time, its always been the way-its therefore the time of rites of passage. We just don't have many good ones in the west or developed world, hence the many problems that arise at this time. Youth can be channelled to good or bad ends at this juncture. The youth brigades of Mao and Hitler a case in point.

Ideally the expenditure of energy is regular, neither too much or too little, and in way that doesn't destroy the body or mind of the present or the future person. So healthy pursuits are ideal otherwise the kid gets into trouble, as can be seen with teenagers feeling unable to express or understand themselves without resorting to violence and anti social behaviour. Simply they have lots of energy and no means to channel it. They would have been young warriors in the distant past, with that energy transformed by heat training. Now without that destructive and anti social behaviour is an obvious vent. Having been and done that myself, I can a test to this directly and not as a theory. I fortunately didn't get caught or prosecuted for my petty illegal activities { and Im sure my life would have been a lot different if I had going to prison}. Friends of mine died from over doses, tragic accident, or just ruined their lives for ever through various but avoidable pursuits. Some went insane and were institutionalised, some attempted suicide, some successfully. Others are now hard nosed millionaires.

Youth is our spring and summer, is very Yang, it needs Yin balance, but not suppression. That's why we have the 'Yang' of Fathers and the 'Yin' of mothers to aid this balance. If its absent in any way even if both parents are present real problems arise. Hence parents and society have to guide lay down rules and laws, but do their best to allow and provide the teen to express their sense of individuality and power constructively. Not suppression, humiliation, nor censorship. Martial arts, Yoga, or any exercise are ideal as the develop positive life skills and relationships with others. That's what the Chinese did well for thousands of years with a lot of success. Not that they always got it right.

In middle age, our autumns, we have pursued our life's in various ways, much of which would have taken its toll. Many who have trained from youth are still fine and doing well. Those who begin in middle age, need to repair as best as possible the ravages of the stress from careers and family responsibility. Its a time of Yang waning, of Yin rising. We have less physical capacities, our bodies are ageing, but we have skills, wisdom and experince to pass on.

In old age, our winter, if some one has trained from youth there still may be modifications necessary. If they start training now the work is very hard, but possible. I remember a story from my late teacher Ken Homan of a man he met in china in the 80's who started tai chi in his 70's and started teaching in his 90's. Ken was very vocal about this mans vitality. It impressed me a lot.

Seasonally we adjust too. Less Yang training in winter more in summer. Its a time of rest with moderate activity. Its personal but easy to workout once you get the jist. In harmony with natural law is the Taoist way, and that appeals to me the most rather than trying to bend nature to your will.

***7. You mentioned that first impressions are not always correct when dealing with others, teachers or students, can you explain please.***

Simply put 'see' the person, not the 'projection'. People are often a multitude of projections, or 'Masks'. Actors learn how to do this, but many other professions do it too. In yoga we were taught about the mask we all wear {whether we realise it or not} and how compared to wild animals who don't have this, our faces are often overtly two sided- or as the saying goes indicating someone untrustworthy and of a devious nature 'two faced'. This we did by comparing photos and mirror reflections. The left hand side of the persons face is the true face, the right the projection or mask. Looking at a number of celebrities and politicians we saw some striking differences and some very unpleasant sides to their otherwise smiling faces. To really get it the face must be viewed straight on and not as at an angle, whether in real life or in a photo.

Of course the mask can extend and become the whole aspect of the person. Their demeanour, their voice their whole projection. Often only when caught of guard or when they can 'let down their guard', do you what's beneath all the layers. Politicians and world leaders can be masters of this.

We learnt it to help understand any strangers we encountered, work colleagues, students etc, also as part of our learning our own projections so we could arrive at a balanced, honest, and a more natural and truthful projection. Most projections are about fear, power and the need for control. The extrovert and the introvert, the egotistical, and the shy all have their own 'flavour' or 'signature' projections. Many become quite brilliant at manipulating their projections, their motivations are not always for the greater good. Dictators and tyrants a case in point.

We give animals neuroses as pets or in captivity. A wild lion, tiger, ape, or horse is balanced. It is just what it is. No need to be

anything else, what it is functions within its environment. This is also true I would say of genuine religious figures too. Still more lions in the world than those though!;-}

***8. How does a teacher know what to teach a student, I noticed you approach us all in a different way when dealing with us individually, and the class is different each week. Can't we all just learn the same thing each time?***

Experience. Of teaching but also of your own development from novice onwards. As the old sayings go 'master yourself, then others', 'physician heal thyself', 'what you practice you become', and best advice 'practice what you preach'. None of that doesn't come with mistakes, pitfalls, and a long learning curve.

Energetic sensitivity is a big part of it, the ability to recognise what another needs and where they are at. Mine is pretty good but pales against my best teachers.

Teaching 'one size fits all' is easy, adapting to all sizes and shapes of student out there is not. Its a lot of work, but it gives the best results though I believe.

***9. It seems to be a lot of work teaching. Im training to become an instructor myself, sometimes though I wonder why Im doing it, Im not always patient, and it seems students don't always follow advice, or even practice!***

I make it quite clear I personally never intended nor wanted to teach when I was young. If Shiv {my Yoga Teacher} had not pointed me in that direction and given me his class to run and then as my own, I doubt I would sought it out. I did not get on with the majority of Teachers in school or college. I had very little respect therefore for this profession. The stresses my mother put up with as a nursery school teacher did little to improve my respect for the vocation.

Only because I was already teaching did my Teacher Rupert ask me to run his UK Tai Chi class while he was living in Germany. I did his teaching training module with him after this.

I asked myself more often than I like especially in the beginning why I was doing all this. I didn't make any money and i was often exhausted by only teaching a few times a week. Students rarely followed my training program at home and their problems they wanted help with, regardless of ignoring my advice when offered, seemed endless. I've had to deal with their suicides {attempted and successful}, breakdowns, terminal, serious, and everyday illness, and the general wear and tear of their

everyday life. However the upside is those who get something however little from the classes. So you just do what you can and hope for the best. That's all you can do. It really tested my compassion and stamina over the years. It still can.

Shiv told me the story of the first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak-who founded the religion. Excuse my over simplified version. Nanak visited various Yogis and Masters who lived in the caves and retreats above a town if not towns etc. These were very advanced practitioners with amazing powers. He asked them what good it was all their powers if it didn't help the common people and their daily suffering down in the cities and towns. He asked, suggested, or told them they should to go down and help those in need. That was the true reason for having these 'siddhis' or powers.

In other words its easy to have a practice and enjoy the fruits of your labour, all safe and warm by yourself with no one to burst your bubble, or being with like minded adepts where everyone is pretty much in agreement. The real work is to be out in the world and work amongst those ready to pop this reverie, amongst the grime, imperfection, and suffering of others less illuminated than you {if you're on that deluded ego trip}. All the while you have to train to maintain your own centre, compassion and stillness. Its not easy or glamorous. Sure you can make a film out of it, like the suffering needed to gain martial arts or sporting excellence {how many times have we had to put up with that cliché in the movies}, but doing it, being it, is often a real bear of a 24/7 experience.

I teach therefore because it helps others, and challenges me often in ways I'd prefer not to be. I don't know how long I will be open to any direction.

However I've gained greater clarity and stability, even maturity {possibly} by this endeavour. For that I'd recommend it to anyone who really wants to wise up. Relieving the suffering of others is a big call, I try and do my little bit but its hard to say how successful that is. The old adage you learn by teaching is very true. A handful make a very good living from it, even fewer become very wealthy by it. The majority like me have to have another source of income until they can make it purely on teaching.

I've lived like a hermit at one extreme, and had lots interaction and a wild social life at the other. I've hung out with like the kind and compassionate, as individuals and on retreats. As a punk kid I flopped around with addicts, wasters, small time criminals, and the frankly deranged and unhinged. I've had money and success, moments of minor fame and infamy, popularity and fun, poverty, isolation, loneliness and boredom. Teaching spanned many of those the extremes and my experiences.

Its not always easy, and teaching a class of those possibly who need more than you can offer, or who don't want what you can give can really test ones stamina. Would I recommend it to another. It all depends if you want to help or not. If you do do it, if you

don't, then don't. Its not for everyone.

**10. *There are some amazing trees in your films and pictures- where were they?***

Most and the best I've seen were and are in California USA, in Yosemite and Kings Canyon National Parks. Giant Redwoods, and the the ones growing out of rock are sometimes referred to 'immortal cypresses' I believe as they live so long. I cant express how blown away by them i was. Its one reason I want to spend more time there if not live. Having planted {maybe unwisely} some giant redwoods in my garden before I saw the 'finished' product it was quite a thing to see. Some are thousands of years old. Its mind blowing. I highly recommend anyone into trees, wilderness experiences, and great 'chi', to get to these parks. Next stop for me is Yellowstone hopefully. If not, at least I was lucky enough to see something of that continent.