

Wednesday, November 12, 2008

"When you are fatigued, do t'ai chi."

Â Â My t'ai chi teacher Len Kennedy once said: "When you are fatigued, do t'ai chi." On another occasion, I learned the following from Len: Internally, during one of "those meetings," the t'ai chi practitioner does t'ai chi, through relaxing and sinking into one's chair or into the ground if standing;Â by relaxing actively through being fully aware of what is happening around the t'ai chi practitioner without getting sucked into nonsense; and by emptying the mind and body of stress and wasted energy in order to deal with the matter at hand.Â Len Kennedy learned t'ai chi from Robert W. Smith, who was t'ai chi megamaster Cheng Man Ch'ing's first Western student. Recently, I found this response to nihilism from Professor Cheng, as recounted by Fred Lehrman: Â "I remember sitting one morning several years ago with Professor Cheng and several students in the Asian Library at Columbia University. The Club of Rome Report had just been released by MIT, and one of the students had bought in a clipping from the New York Times outlining the hopelessness of solving the compounded problems posed by overpopulation, food shortage, energy resource depletion, atmospheric pollution, radioactive waste, etc. The student was quite upset, and asked professor Cheng what he thought of the situation, and how we could get out of it. The Taiji master turned the question around and asked the questioner what his ideas were. The student gave his answer, and sat expectantly, awaiting correction from the Sage. Instead, Professor Cheng turned to another student at the table, and asked, 'What do you think about what he said?' This continued until each student had commented on the others ideas, and it was clear that the subject had been exhausted. There was really no way to solve the problem. Professor Cheng went back to reading his book.Â "After a pause, the first student, more upset than ever, asked again for some word from the teacher. Professor Cheng leaned forward, and put his book down next to the cup of hot tea which had just been refilled for him. 'What will happen to the world? I donâ€™t know. Look at this vapor; it comes from the tea, it goes into the air, and right about here' Â he pointed in the air Â "you donâ€™t see it anymore. Where does it go?' He sat quietly for a moment while we pondered the empty space left after the world had destroyed itself. 'Donâ€™t worry about it,' he said, 'Nothing gets lost.'" Â Read the rest of Fred Lehrman's powerful essay here. Â Such lessons from Cheng Man Ch'ing keep me inspired to practice t'ai chi, doing the form morning and night without fail, and applying the t'ai chi principles to everything I do. Tea anyone?Â Jon Katz.Â

Posted by Jon Katz in Persuasion at 00:00