What are the Taiji Classics and what is their relevance to Taiji practice?
The Taiji Classics include the overarching principles of what is known today as Taijiquan. Each principle is more like a book title, having an extraordinary number of ramifications.

How did you first encounter the Classics and how were they taught?
When I first learned Taiji in Taiwan, my teachers would use phrases from the Taiji Classics that I didn’t understand. When I subsequently trained in Tokyo with Wang Shu Jin’s most senior student there, he too would throw out old classical Chinese phrases in Japanese. Although I still didn’t understand the meaning, what was very clear is that when a teacher really wanted to make a point, they would quote something from the Classics.

As the years went on, I found that some teachers would commonly either state a principle from the Classics and then teach it, or teach you a lot of stuff and say, “Well, this is where it is in the Classics.” and keep going through the ramifications.

Then in 1983, when I was first learning the Old Yang Style I was taught Classics line by line. This occurred first with Bai Hua, Liu Hong Cheh’s other disciple, and then my teacher Liu himself. With Liu it went further because he went into where and how the Classics interrelate with the Daoist tradition.

The vast majority of the material that’s in the Taiji Classics, most of the phrases that have to do with qi and spirit, come from a much older work that was from four or five hundred years earlier. I believe it’s called the Hua Ting Ying Jie. While the rest are taken from war manuals.

So, you have to know how to look at the Taiji Classics in terms of what it’s doing for your qi or how it is specifically relating to what you do with your qi and your mind to produce the internal power used for fighting, because they’re all mixed together. In the old Chinese way of doing things these wasn’t considered to be separate. The internal martial arts were based upon applying the principles of qigong and the larger principle of Daoist meditation to be effective in warfare. So to say exactly where one started and the other one finished was a little bit tricky.

Now, as I went further I learned from Liu how those same principles had their cognates within Daoist meditation, which has more to do with how the principles are applied in terms of spirit. Again, principles are generalised and have many, many layers of meaning. It isn’t just one thing. Today, most people who teach Taiji don’t really know the Classics.

It sounds as though traditional Taijiquan doesn’t have the mind or the spirit work of the Daoist tradition and that Liu showed you more about the roots of the Classics.

Liu taught me from the roots because that’s how he learned it, and because he understood Taijiquan as a martial art and the internal martial arts in general. He could clearly see the thread. The Taiji Classics go to this point, but then what are the implications of those statements? Many martial arts practitioners only know some of the chapters in the book. They don’t know all the chapters in the book and depending upon the tradition, it’s a question of how much is left out. You see if you have a body of knowledge, depending upon the applications you try to create, you may not use most of them. You may only use some parts of the body of knowledge that are needed for specific applications, or you may use the whole thing.

There is nothing written in the Taiji Classics that says: If you do this, you will become spirirually enlightened, if you do that, you will become a living Buddha. or, if you do this and that, you will become a Daoist immortal. Instead, the text looks at how to practice martial and energetic techniques, or describes a generalised principle to embody. The implication is that, if you do, you will be able to replicate what is talked about in the following stanzas.

Again, the Taiji Classics are more geared towards martial arts. As I have repeatedly said, I once spent time with Yang Shouzhong (Yang Zhenming) who was the original Yang’s eldest great grandson. In my conversations with him, he said that his family had never practiced meditation. “We do martial arts and qigong. That is what we have always done.” So many of the implications about where practice might take you in terms of emotions, the mind, karma and essence, what you might call serious spiritual subjects was not a part of Taiji. Yang was very clear that his family did not do meditation, and he knew that this was going to be a shared statement.
You have highlighted the phrase “From posture to posture the internal energy is unbroken.” Could you explain what it means and how it relates to the practice of meditation?

The phrase “From posture to posture the internal energy is unbroken.” is a key concept in martial arts and meditation practice. It means that the flow of energy, whether physical or mental, should continue uninterrupted from one action to the next. In meditation, this can be understood as the continuous flow of consciousness without any interruption. The goal is to maintain this connection to the natural flow of energy and thought, ensuring that it remains unbroken.

The phrase is often used in conjunction with other principles, such as the dantian in Chinese martial arts and the kundalini in yoga, which are believed to be the storehouses of energy. The practitioner is encouraged to focus on maintaining this energy flow, which is said to be the key to achieving higher states of consciousness.

In practice, this means that the practitioner should avoid any actions that could disrupt the flow of energy. For example, sudden movements or thoughts that cause a break in concentration. The practitioner should strive to maintain a steady, uninterrupted flow of energy, allowing the body and mind to work together in harmony.

Overall, the phrase serves as a reminder to remain connected to the natural flow of energy and thought, ensuring that it remains unbroken. This is believed to be essential for achieving higher states of consciousness and spiritual development.