



the unbearable lightness of *chi*

Martial arts helps differently  
abled child rise to her abilities

Photographs and story by Eric Nomburg



Caliah Rounds has a lot of energy today. Her balance is better than usual and her movements are almost fluid. She smiles as Holly Pope, her tai chi teacher, helps her into a correct position.

Sometimes just standing still on the hardwood floor can be a real challenge for 11-year-old Caliah, who has cerebral palsy.

Pope stands motionlessly and mindfully raises up her arms to a static posture. She invites Caliah to do the same.

“Do you want to do the 21 form?” Pope asks Caliah.

Caliah ignores her and starts a free-form dance up and down the studio, but eventually stands next to Pope. She looks at herself in the mirror, then settles into the tai chi meditative standing posture and relaxes.

Caliah begins a series of careful movements alongside Pope with precision and grace.

African-American, her hair in long braids adorned with an assortment of beads and pins, Caliah was in Pope’s first class. She

often wears a colorful scarf and a big smile. She is cheerful and energetic.

But Caliah is nonverbal. Her right side is spastic and she sometimes drools. She was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at birth.

Caliah faces a constant battle for her coordination, strength and balance. The fact that she can practice martial arts is a real victory, and a testament to Pope, who believes that tai chi can be a motivating therapy for people often stuck in wheelchairs and get little more than token exercise.

Pope is lean, athletic and flexible with kind eyes and a beaming smile. Originally from Vesoul in eastern France, she studied literature, art history and chemistry, but something kept steering her away from academia and toward physical activities.

She was one of those kids whose foot was always tapping. She couldn’t sit still in class. She wanted to be in the water. She began surfing, which took her around the world and landed her in Los Angeles.

There she met her husband Bernard Langan... in a dream.

Langan is an internal martial artist based in Oakland. Internal martial arts like tai chi and bagua are fighting systems that cultivate inner stillness and relaxation, whereas external martial arts like karate and taekwondo focus more on body conditioning.

Pope dreamt of the word “bagua.” She didn’t know what it meant. At a friend’s suggestion she Googled it and Langan’s studio appeared at the top of her search.

She found that bagua developed from Taoist meditation. It emphasizes spiral movements such as circle walking, which is just what it sounds like — walking in a circle.

A bagua practitioner starts by extending both arms forward, palms open. Their face and upper torso twist toward the center of the circle while their feet point straight ahead, tracing its circumference.

It can be used both for meditation and for combat.



Previous: Reflected in the mirror, Holly Pope, left, and Caliah Rounds, right, walk toward Caliah’s mother, Cameca Combs, at the end of their weekly tai chi class. Above: Pope, right, helps Caliah remove her shoes and support straps before class. Caliah, who suffers from cerebral palsy, takes tai chi lessons from Pope.



Caliah’s right side is spastic. She is especially tight in her shoulder area. Pope supports Caliah’s arm in order to release the tension in her arm muscles. Pope says, “My goal is for differently abled children to learn discipline, focus, and structure and have fun with martial arts training.”





Caliah distracts easily. When she notices her mother, Cameca Combs, step out of the studio to take a phone call, Caliah runs to the door to get her attention.



Pope, left, teaches Caliah, right, a pose in I Liq Chuan, which translates to “mental-physical martial arts.” The practice emphasizes developing internal power through mental attitude and awareness.

Pope moved to the Bay Area in 2003 to become Langan’s dedicated bagua student. With Langan she learned other internal martial arts such as tai chi and bodywork.

Visiting martial arts masters also instructed Pope. After many teaching seminars, she became skilled enough to substitute for Langan when he was away.

Langan and Pope fell in love and after a seven-year engagement, finally got married.

Caliah is prone to distraction. After stretching out her back on the exercise ball with Pope’s help, she gets bored and walks away.

Pope sighs and smiles. She tries reasoning with Caliah to return and continue her exercise. Caliah answers with a toothy grin but wants to do something else. She walks toward the exercise bag and pulls out spongy balls. Instantly, Pope suggests they roll a ball to each other while doing a seated wide-legged forward bend. Caliah agrees.

They sit facing each other with their legs stretched wide, rolling the ball back and

forth. The activity lasts for about a minute before Caliah gets up, bored again.

She runs away. She comes back. She picks up the ball and begins bouncing it against the wall.

Robert Fitch, an instructor from the Disabled Students Programs and Services (DSPS) at City College, is surprised by Caliah’s mobility. He serves on the board at the Cerebral Palsy Center for the Bay Area, where he worked from 1983 to 1988.

Most of the Center’s participants use wheelchairs. Their exercise programs include massage therapy, Feldenkrais, yoga and stretching, but largely focus on just getting people in and out of their wheelchairs.

Fitch describes most cases of cerebral palsy as the results of birth trauma, but adds that it can also occur in utero, before delivery.

“It’s not the same as Down syndrome,” Fitch says. “It’s not an intellectual disability necessarily. It affects the motor system. People can be CP (cerebral palsy) and have a huge range of physical and mental ability.”

In Caliah’s case, she had hydrocephalus in utero. At 36 weeks it was discovered that cerebrospinal fluid was not draining away from her brain properly.

“She has a lot of spasticity in her body,” says her mother, Cameca Combs. “But she grasps concepts and wants to participate.”

Since working with Pope her posture has straightened up. She’s become stronger and more centered.

Pope’s path to teaching martial arts to children with disabilities began when one tai chi classmate changed the course of her career.

Victor Bashkeev, who studied alongside Pope, has cerebral palsy, but developed physical control over it by practicing tai chi.

“He went from hunched over, unbalanced and weak,” Pope says, “to standing up straight and having such a precise touch. He could hit my body mass upon contact. I was intrigued.”

CoachArt, an organization that offers free recreational classes to children with chronic illnesses, contacted Pope when her studio appeared on their Google search. They were looking for donations, partners and

“He went from hunched over, unbalanced and weak, to standing up straight and having such a precise touch.”

— Holly Pope

volunteers. Inspired by her experience with Bashkeev, she wanted to help.

“I’ll teach,” she decided. “I want to teach kids with cerebral palsy.”

Caliah became her first student.

Born with one leg longer than the other, the young girl was prone to falling down.

Her mother believed that some sort of sport would help her daughter so she signed her up for Pope’s class.



Pope helps Caliah stand in a Harwin Balancer, a device with foot pedals that activate the small intrinsic muscles of coordination throughout the body.



The martial arts work has had a dramatic effect on her balance and gait.

"It takes a longer time for things to transmit in her brain," Combs says. "Holly teaches her to use the body she has.

"I think there's a misconception about martial arts. It doesn't always have to be about the kicking and punching." But the core training needed to do those movements is beneficial to children with special needs, she adds.

At the start of another practice session, Pope removes the braces from Caliah's legs and brings the punching mitts out.

"Punch the center!" instructs Pope.

She defends as Caliah works on punching and kicking the mitts.

Props like the exercise ball help Caliah with balance. She uses one to stretch out her back.

Pope taught Caliah a 21-step tai chi form from the I Liq Chuan system, a 20th-century Chinese martial art that emphasizes the development of internal power through mental attitude and awareness.

Pope has other students with health challenges. One has sickle cell anemia and another is severely developmentally delayed. Caliah assists Pope in teaching them. She shows them how to make a fist to hit the punching mitts.

"Her focus is much better. Even the doctors are surprised."

— Holly Pope

The class pretends to be birds so they can learn form. They practice the White Crane form, which builds structure and looseness in their bodies. "You've got to make it fun," Pope says.

After working with Caliah for a year and a half, Pope says, "Her focus is much better. Even the doctors are surprised. She doesn't fall down as much as she used to."

Garrett Chinn, a teacher from City College's older adults department, agrees that tai chi helps with balance.

"Internationally, 35 to 40 percent of people over 65 experience a fall within one year," Chinn says. "My advanced groups are down to five percent."

He adds, "Some [of the students] who fell remembered in the heat of the moment to bend and relax. They had the presence of mind to do that. It blows me away."

Fitch has similar sentiments, "This kind of bodywork can improve posture and mobility, fight atrophy and help with balance."

Pope may have started a trend teaching mind and body connections to those who are differently abled.

In response to requests for health- and movement-focused classes from the San Francisco disability community, City College will be offering a class titled Breath, Sound and Motion for Well-Being in spring 2018.

"[City College] is unique in its response to community needs," says Muriel L. Parenteau, department chair of DSPS.

The class will introduce mind, body, breath and sound connections between the various modalities. It's designed for students with and without disabilities. It includes tai chi chih, which is similar to tai chi but without the martial arts aspect.

Pope hopes to reach out to more cerebral palsy organizations like Ability Now, one of the largest developmental assistance organizations in the Bay Area, to see if they would be interested in incorporating martial arts into their physical therapies.

She wants to write out a tai chi system for doctors, nurses and physical therapists who have patients with cerebral palsy. Pope hopes they will incorporate martial arts philosophies and principles into the therapies they already do.

"It's been so profound for Victor," Pope recalls of her friend with cerebral palsy. "He's got a Ph.D. There's nothing wrong with his brain. It's the disconnect between the signals. You want your leg to move and it doesn't do what you want it to do."

It's been profound for Caliah, too.

Class draws to an end. After reviewing pictures from the I Liq Chuan manual, Pope attempts one more kicking technique, but Caliah has had enough and begins to hug Pope playfully.

Pope notices drool around Caliah's mouth. By pressing her fingertips to pressure points on Caliah's cheek, chin and neck, she reduces the drooling and helps relax her face muscles. As Pope presses, Caliah begins to press the same points on Pope's face.

"One way I know she's learning and understanding is that she wants to do it on me," Pope says. "Then I know she's downloading the information. It's like, 'Yeah! You got it!'" ♦



Pope gives Caliah therapeutic bodywork on a weekly basis.