
TAIJIQUAN

LEARNING HOW TO LEARN

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INTRODUCTION

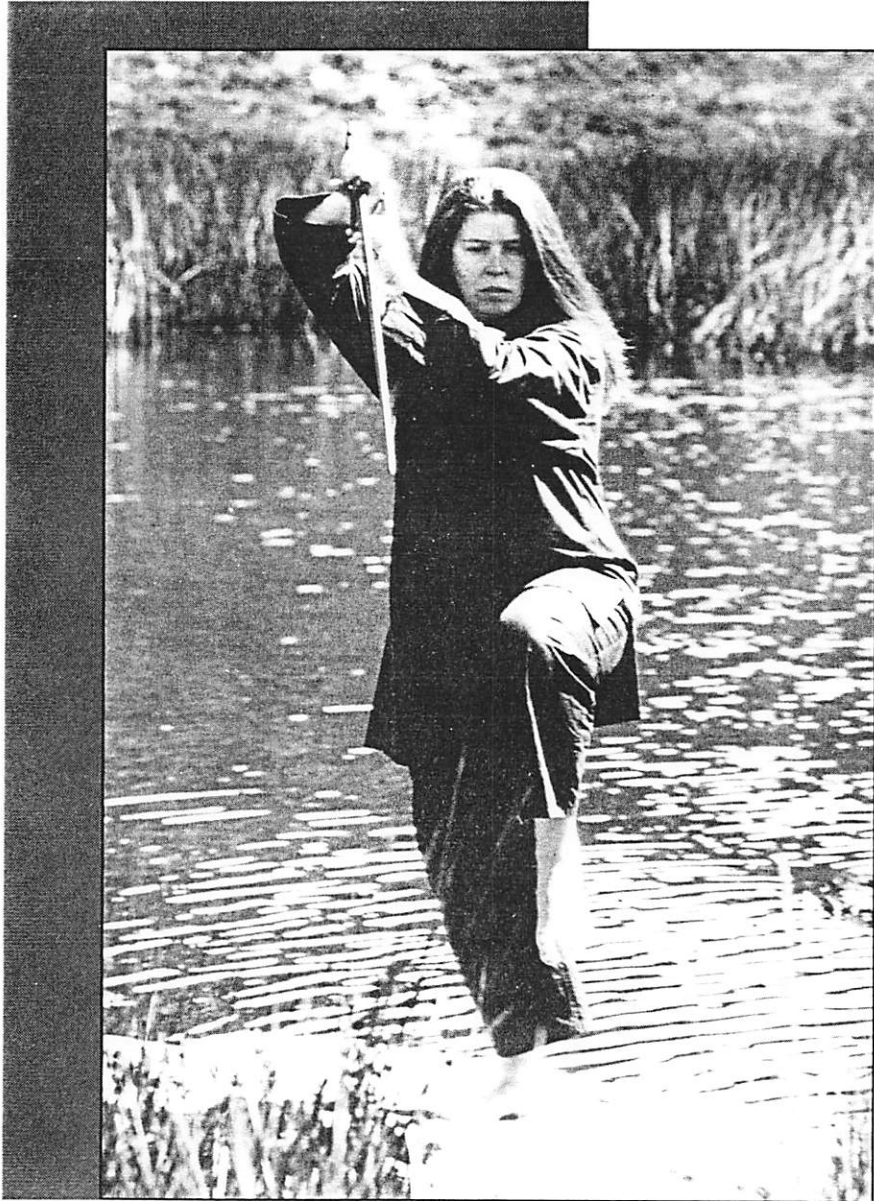
When I first began to study Taijiquan in 1978, I was attracted to it, like many beginning students, by its description as a form of "meditation in motion." I had visions of flowing in dream-like movements, sensing peace and harmony all around me. I arrived at my first class full of happy expectations, sure that I was about to experience the secret of the Daoist masters. As I watched my teacher move with elegance and gentle power, I became even more excited. That excitement soon turned into frustration and disappointment as I struggled to learn the two short movements she so patiently repeated. At the end of the class, I was sure of only one thing: either my expectations had to go out the door or I did. I chose to stay.

Over and over during the past ten years that I have been teaching, I watch my own students arrive at their first class with the same expectations that I had. They seek to be more peaceful, to find balance, to learn something that will help them cope with stress. Their longing is so great that many hope to reap the benefits of Taijiquan from the moment they begin to learn the form. In this mode of wishful thinking and longing for Paradise Now, they often ignore common sense. No one would expect to be a great pianist after one lesson, and yet many beginning Taiji students believe that after one short class they will be able to move with the grace and effortlessness of an experienced Taiji practitioner.

Most Taiji students who stop studying after a short time do so not because Taiji is difficult to learn, but because their expectations are not satisfied quickly enough. The ensuing frustration is so emotionally painful they decide to quit rather than continue to be disappointed.

Part of the problem lies in the fact that students approach learning Taiji as something to achieve, something to be successful at. But learning Taiji, especially in the beginning, is really a process of learning how to learn. Learning how to learn means that what a student discovers about himself is just as important, if not more so, than simply performing a Taiji movement correctly. When the emphasis is on how and not simply what is learned, a student embraces everything

WHEN THE EMPHASIS IS ON HOW AND NOT SIMPLY WHAT IS LEARNED, A STUDENT EMBRACES EVERYTHING AS PART OF HIS TAIJI PRACTICE, INCLUDING HIS FEELINGS AND EXPECTATIONS.



A POSTURE FROM A
TAIJIQUAN SWORD FORM.
WEAPONS TRAINING IS A VITAL
ASPECT OF DEEPENING A
STUDENT'S UNDERSTANDING
OF THE TAIJI PRINCIPLES.

Photo courtesy of L. Lehrhaupt.

as part of his Taiji practice, including his feelings and expectations. Frustrations, disappointment, or low self-esteem, instead of becoming obstacles to practice, can be transformed into fertile ground for learning about oneself.

In learning how to learn, we discover the essence of Taiji as a meditative practice: the study of the self. Here, too, students must often re-examine their expectations of what meditation is. Many think it is the path to an enlightened state of bliss and wisdom, a state in which we are above all problems, free from attachment and desire. But the study of the self is, in fact, the study of the self as it is, not just the narrow view of how we would like ourselves to be. Practicing Taiji as meditation invites us to stay open to each moment exactly as it is, to remain present and acknowledge all of our experience, not selecting or rejecting anything. By staying open we create space to examine our fears, disappointments, and expectations. Bringing them into awareness allows us to work with them in a healing way. Their power to control us lessens because they no longer remain hidden.

Practicing Taiji as meditation, the heart of which is learning how to learn, requires that we cultivate six qualities to support our practice. In the discussion that follows, I would like to examine each of them as they relate to the study of Taijiquan.

EFFORT

Perhaps the most important part of making an effort is taking responsibility for our learning rather than expecting someone else to do our work for us. Though we all would agree that "from nothing comes nothing," we often secretly hope that we can learn something without having to work at it. If we don't learn something, we are quick to blame the teacher or the method rather than examine our own commitment in terms of time and energy.

If there is one hard cold fact about Taijiquan, it is that without regular practice we do not progress. We can talk about developing balance or coordination a hundred times, but it will never replace one training session. Developing a consistent practice schedule is not easy; there is so much in our private or work lives that seems to demand our attention. Yet when we don't practice we set ourselves up for a cycle of disappointment: we don't develop because we don't practice; we don't practice because we don't seem to develop.

When we begin to feel uneasy about how little we practice, we have an excellent opportunity to study ourselves. There can be many different reasons not to practice: we are afraid of not doing it right, we do not feel calm enough, we find it difficult to be alone with ourselves, we feel we are wasting time. Making an effort in this case implies letting these feelings arise and acknowledging them. In doing so, their power to overwhelm or paralyze us lessens, and we can renew our commitment to do it again one more time. We may do this many times, but each time we are getting to know ourselves a bit better. Practicing is something that needs to be practiced. When we give ourselves the chance, the motivation and sense of flow often help us to continue. If we do not choose to continue, then our choice is the result of a conscious decision resulting from the effort to study ourselves.

I have purposely avoided the word discipline because I feel we confuse the word effort with discipline. Discipline often implies forcing ourselves to do something, whatever we feel. Discipline is something we measure in terms of time and amount: the more the better. It often involves ignoring where we are in service to achieving a future goal. Top athletes are said to be disciplined: that many succumb to doping or other unhealthy practices in pushing their bodies

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF WATER — ITS FLOW, SOFTNESS AND ABILITY TO ACCOMMODATE TO ANY SHAPE — ARE QUALITIES TAIJI PRACTITIONERS SEEK TO EMULATE.

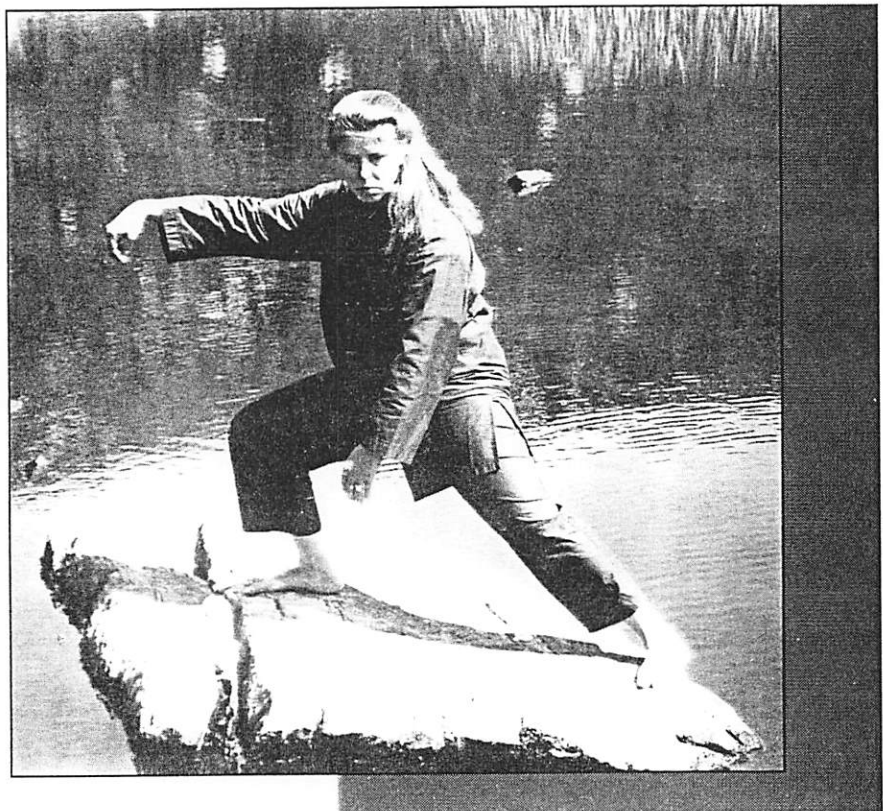


Photo courtesy of L. Lehrhaupt.

beyond human limits is the negative side of this do-or-die attitude to training. When applied to Taijiquan, this kind of discipline hinders rather than furthers practice. We no longer pay attention to our feelings or working with ourselves, but emphasize meeting a standard. It is Taiji without heart.

FOCUS

Learning how to learn requires that we develop the capacity to quiet the mind so that we can focus on the work at hand. To quiet the mind does not mean to erase thought, but to dampen and subdue the internal dialogue that occupies so much mental energy. It also does not mean to control thought, but to experience a sense of opening and spaciousness that happens when we are no longer the prisoner of our thoughts and emotions. Mental space is created when we begin to see our thoughts for what they are – just thoughts – and we stop identifying with them as representing who and all we really are.

Simple, clear exercises in which the thinking mind is given a task are the most effective techniques for channeling scattered mental energy into a clear line of focus. Learning a Taiji form, which involves repeating each movement over and over, is an excellent practice in this respect. True, not all students experience learning a move as a simple clear task, but when they have the chance to practice over and over, encouraged by a concentrated class environment, their minds have a chance to focus and quiet down. During training they have an opportunity to set aside their mental preoccupation with themselves or with other problems and concentrate on the task at hand. Such concentration, while tiring, can also be rejuvenating and therapeutic.

In Taijiquan we have a wonderful opportunity to develop focus – a fine-tuned, laser-sharp concentration that is enhanced by practicing the form and paying attention. Each time we are dreaming, we return to the feeling of muscles and joints moving, the body in motion. It is partly for this reason that learning or teaching a form quickly robs the student of the opportunity to work with precision. Learning a form quickly becomes a rush to get something and display it, rather than experiencing the subtle process of fine-tuning a movement. It leads to a lot of messy, dreamy or even technically competent Taiji, but not one that emphasizes the inner development of the practitioner.

AWARENESS

Joseph Goldstein, a teacher of Vipassana, or insight meditation, describes awareness as "bare attention," which "means observing things as they are, without choosing, without comparing, without evaluating, without laying our projections and expectations onto what is happening, cultivating instead a choiceless and non-interfering awareness" (Goldstein, 1987, p. 20).

In Taiji practice, maintaining bare attention applies to the state of mind in which we learn and teach a movement. For the teacher, it means to emphasize the experience of doing a movement, not demanding millimeter exactness and conformity to some fixed image of the Taiji posture. Often the minutely precise corrections that some Taiji teachers make are a substitute for good teaching, which involves working with each student personally, where he is at in the moment, rather than simply treating him as clay that can be molded into a dead shape.

Maintaining bare attention for the student means to attempt to be fully present in each moment, to be awake, aware, and able to move and respond to change without resistance. In Taiji it means to be here and now when doing the form, not dancing in Dreamland. Moment by moment we experience our body, movement, environment separately and as one. It is the unity and uniqueness of each movement/moment that we experience as the Taiji.

PATIENCE

I often tell my beginning students that there is one phrase they are going to hear over and over again until they think that is all I know how to say. That phrase is, "Once More!" Patience in Taiji practice is exercising faith and making a commitment to the learning process of "Once More." What is this process exactly? When we do a movement again and again, our practice is open-ended. Repeating something is not a mechanical re-run of an activity or a determined effort to do something solely to get it right, but a path of discovery. We pay attention to each moment, to experience what we can learn in that moment. It may be something concrete, such as noticing we are not in balance when we take a step, or it may be the joy of experiencing coordinated movement, where effort and flow merge in seamless non-action: doing without doing.

Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, a Zen Master, calls this quality of a discovering mind "beginner's mind." When something is new for us, we are generally open and ready to receive, eager to experience all aspects. When we think we have mastered something, we close down to seeing new perspectives because we've made an investment in knowing. We don't want to risk or challenge this feeling of security. When we lose patience and do not want to try again, we are closing down to life and to learning from our own experience. As Suzuki Roshi writes:

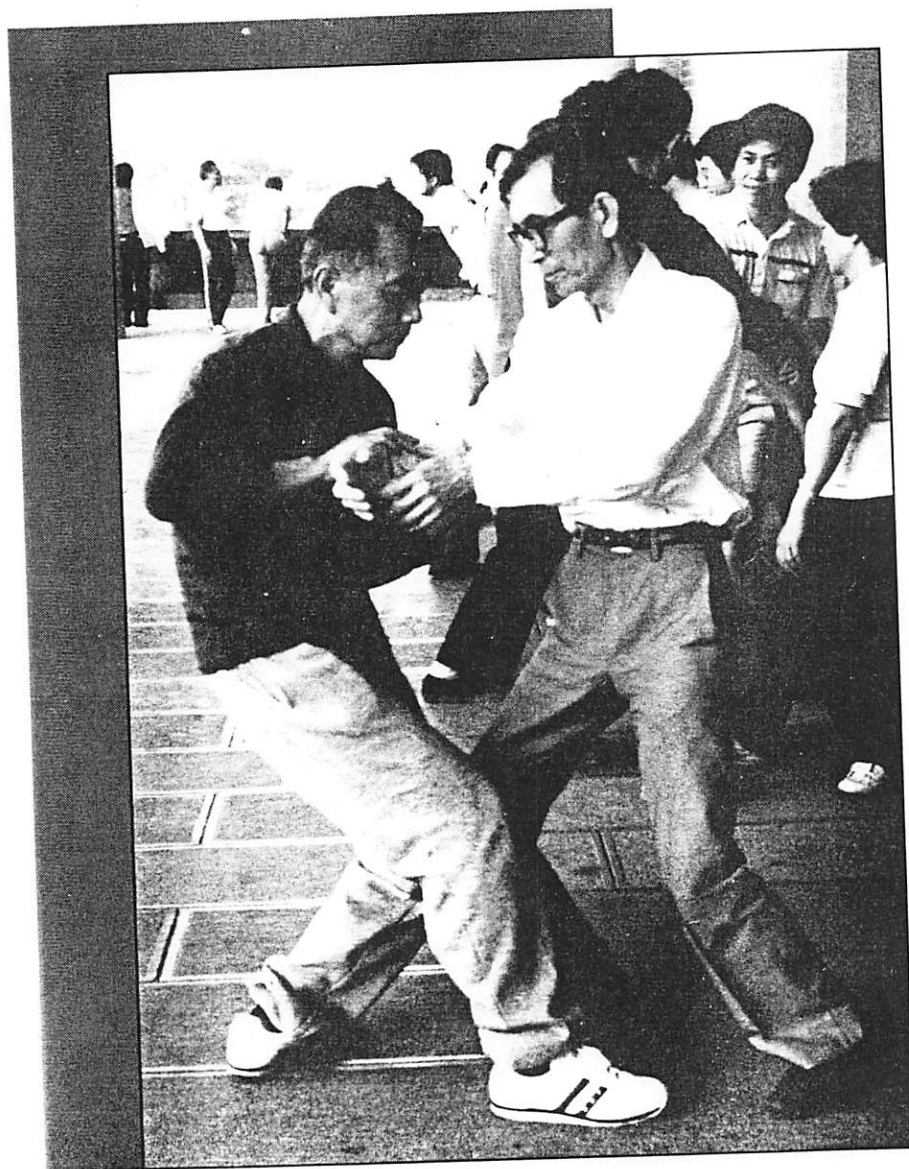
***In the beginner's mind
there are many possibilities;
in the expert's mind
there are few.***

(Suzuki 1982, p. 21)

Perhaps the most difficult part of repeating something over and over again is learning to work with boredom. In fact the moment when one is bored is the moment when a deeper level of learning can take place. What we label as boredom is often a simple name that covers much deeper feelings that we do not want to acknowledge: frustration with the difficulty of learning, disappointment at what we label as our own clumsiness, anger at not being quicker to achieve something. Far from being a state of deadness, boredom is a rich field for studying the self and a door to experiencing the preciousness of each moment. It's then that we can go beyond simple mastery or getting a move right and be one with each moment by being awake and aware, with all that is part of it. Being committed to "Once More," to making a gentle resolve to start again in each moment, is the heart of this process.

GENTLENESS

We often approach learning Taiji with a harsh, self-critical attitude that does not allow us to be either patient or gentle with ourselves. We apply the same competitive spirit that is so valued in our world, which leads us to judge ourselves constantly, to set up standards of discipline that are personally difficult to attain, or to emphasize our way as the better one. Pema Chodron, a Tibetan Buddhist nun and student of Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, writes: "Meditation practice isn't about trying to throw ourselves away and become something better. It's about befriending who we already are" (Chodron 1991, p. 4). If we are to experience Taiji practice in the same way – as a continual process of opening to ourselves – then we need to let go of these destructive ideas and practice making friends with ourselves. It is a gentle process of acknowledging our strengths without pride and recognizing our weaknesses without scorn. We try to work with ourselves in the same way we would help a baby stand up after he had fallen down. A sense of humor is very helpful in learning to practice gentleness.



TAIJIQUAN PRACTITIONERS
PRACTICING PUSH HANDS IN A
PARK IN TAIPEI, TAIWAN.

Photo courtesy of L. Lehrhaupt.

LETTING GO

Pema Chodron writes: "The quality of opening or letting go . . . helps us to rediscover this ability that we already have to open beyond small-mindedness and to let go of any kind of fixation or limited view. . . . But letting go is not so easy. Rather it's something that happens as a result of working with precision and gentleness. In other words, as you work with being really faithful to the technique in our case, Taijiquan, and being as precise as you can and simultaneously as kind as you can, the ability to let go seems to happen to you. The discovery of your ability to let go spontaneously arises; you don't force it" (Chodron 1991, p. 19).

Letting go of the desire to develop special powers is an important step in Taiji practice. There is, unfortunately, a tendency to promote the development of special powers or heightened faculties by teachers and students of Taiji and *qi-gong*. In one form, it involves repeating stories of famous masters who were said to have such powers as throwing people without touching them, or being able to use such powers to bend steel or withstand physical attack without injury. Others talk about mastering *qi* power and emphasize either its martial arts applications or secret healing techniques. There are investigations of such stories, especially in the sciences of psychology and anthropology, and this is not the place to enter into a discussion of whether these reports are true or not. The real problem for students is a spiritual one: seeking extraordinary powers is a misuse of sacred tradition and feeds our ego and need to master others rather than mastering the self.

The most beneficial way to work with the desire to be special is to acknowledge it. Secretly holding onto the wish to be special but denying that we feel this way is a great obstacle to knowing and making friends with ourselves. We all long to be special in some way so that we can feel better about ourselves. When we name it for what it is, we practice being transparent and take the first important step in letting go of the need to be better than others.

In Taiji we also experience the difficulty of letting go in learning to relax while doing the form and in practicing Push Hands. Letting go in the form means maintaining posture without force, recognizing bad habits, opening to emotional or physical traumas that manifest as unhealthy or stuck body postures – and most of all feeling joy in movement, even if it's clumsy.

Learning to relax in a Taiji posture is the most difficult aspect for many Taiji students. As a teacher, one often stands before a student whose shoulders are up around his ears as he holds his arms outstretched at chest height, only to be told, "But I am relaxed!" The flood of relief that fills the student's face as he lowers his shoulders when you touch them requires no further comment. What is causing the problem? Poor posture, bad biomechanical habits, inappropriate use of muscular force are all part of the answer, but the source of the problem is that the student is doing the move with his mind, not with his body. When we learn to let go of controlling the movements and let our bodies do the moves, based on correct understanding of how our muscle and skeleton systems work, we discover the great secret of Taijiquan as an internal art: effortless power.

Letting go in Push Hands includes cultivating a willingness to work with our resistance to close body contact, our fears of getting hurt, our need to win or not lose face. Letting go is supported as we acknowledge our fear, pride, laziness, aggression, lack of self-confidence and any other thing we hide from ourselves, and gently work with them until they no longer control us or remain hidden. Letting go does not mean erasing or blotting out these feelings or pushing

ourselves to drop them, but making a commitment to face them in gentle awareness.

Wolfe Lowenthal, an American Taiji teacher, gives a wonderful description of how we can use Push Hands training as a way to study ourselves:

***If in pushing I find my partner
straining in resistance,
the fault also lies with
my use of strength –
if I were not being so insistent
he could not resist me.***

***Conversely,
if I feel my partner's hand force
building up on my body,
it is because of my resistance –
if there were no resistance,
he would have
nothing to push against.***

(Lowenthal 1991, p. 132)

When we train in Push Hands and let go of the need to win, the person opposite us becomes a partner, not opponent, in our joint effort to explore the true spirit of Taiji: what we learn about ourselves through "investment in loss."

When teachers say that Taijiquan is a life-long practice, there is often a misunderstanding as to what this means. Often students believe this refers to perfecting the different forms or mastering Push Hands to the point where one always wins. But the essence of Taiji has nothing to do with perfecting technique or mastering something. It has nothing to do with mastering oneself, if by that we mean controlling our thoughts and feelings or reflecting a perfect image of the Master. It is the practice of learning how to learn or resting in beginner's mind, moment to moment. It is the practice of the student who, frustrated and angry at not getting "it," starts to walk out the door, returns to his training place and makes the gentle vow, "I'll try once more."



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