

# How to Be a Real Taiji Student

by Paul B. Gallagher

“Taiji teachers are easy to find; real students are hard to find...”

~B.P. Chan

Many years ago when I began learning Bagua from Master B.P. Chan in New York City, I had a rather startling experience.

After nine years of Taijiquan study and practice, I prevailed upon a dear friend and colleague of mine, Kenneth Cohen, to show me some of the Bagua movements he had learned from Chan. He graciously agreed, and for several days we practiced informally in a local park. Although Ken taught in a very precise manner, our study sessions were very casual, since I merely wanted to learn the rudiments of some Bagua moves so I would have a bit of variation in my practice routine.

After our initial study session, whenever Ken visited my town once or twice a year, we would spend an hour or two in Bagua practice, so I could learn a little more each time. Our practice was never intended by either of us to be an in-depth study, but simply some informal sharing, which I very greatly appreciated.

However, one day I became sufficiently intrigued with Bagua that I wanted to get closer to the source of the teaching. I asked Ken to introduce me to B.P. Chan. Again, he very graciously accommodated my request. So I traveled from western Massachusetts down to New York City to meet Chan for the first time. Of course, I had previously called the Master, seeking his permission to visit a class.

Chan kindly allowed me to observe several classes, and even spent time with me after his class day was finished to answer some of my specific questions. It was quite evident to me,



observing his movements as he demonstrated them in class, that he was a very highly accomplished master (even though, as I later found out, he never liked to be called “master,” and wanted only to be called a “guide” on the path of study).

I was sufficiently captivated and impressed by what I had witnessed during my visit, that I decided I would like to take a few private classes from him just to “polish up” my very rudimentary Bagua movements. We made an appointment for the following Sunday, when he said he could see me before his regular classes started at 10 AM. So I arose around 4:15, left my house just before 5, and arrived at Chan’s studio right at 9 AM.

He asked to see what I had learned so far, so I showed him what I had learned from Ken

Paul Gallagher  
practicing Bagua

who was one of his best students. I told him I had learned the movements very casually, and wanted to refine my movements just a bit, but was not intending a long-term exhaustive study. I hoped he would not be insulted by my request.

He observed my movements silently for a few minutes, then told me he had seen enough. In the most polite terms, he informed me that what I was doing was total crap (not his language), and that I would have to start over from the very beginning. This was **not** a reflection on what Ken had taught me, but rather on the very casual way I had approached both learning and practicing the basics of Bagua that I had learned.

When I had first started learning Taiji, some nine years earlier, I was unable to find a teacher in Boston where I then lived, and so drove for four hours each way to New York and back for a period of 4½ years every weekend to spend Friday afternoons and Saturday mornings in private classes. I had absolutely **no** desire to commute to the City again for any long-term study commitment—and yet this seemed to be exactly what Chan was proposing. I didn't quite know how to respond, so I stood silent for a few moments.

Chan scrutinized me attentively, then said, “Mr. Paul, many of my students want to ‘go to the movies’ . . . they want to learn many forms and many arts, but none of them very well. Do **you** want to go to the movies, Mr. Paul?”

I was stunned—the master had just thrown down the gauntlet and then waited wordlessly to gauge my reaction. I didn't know what to think—I couldn't even imagine another multi-year period of long weekly commutes to study, yet something about Chan's abilities, and his very presence and demeanor, told me that studying with him would be a completely life-changing experience.

I asked if he could recommend a teacher in Massachusetts, hoping the question would not offend him. He quietly answered, “Teachers are easy to find; real students are hard to find,” and then fell silent once more. Somehow, from my very depths, before I could

monitor or censor what I was about to say, I simply blurted out, “Mr. Chan—you are the master, and I would be honored and privileged to be your student.” He smiled slightly, and said “Good boy! You can have a private class before my regular Sunday morning classes. We'll start at 9 AM next Sunday.”

“Mr. Chan—you are the master, and I would be honored and privileged to be your student.”

Thus I began another 4½ year period of weekly commutes from Massachusetts to New York City, arising each Sunday morning at 4:15, taking my private classes and some of Chan's public classes, and returning home late at night, after Chan's class day had ended.

Somehow Chan's quote about “real students” burned in my brain throughout the years. And as I taught Taiji over more than three decades, I totally understood the wisdom and truth of Chan's observation.

### So what is a “real Taiji student”?

Grandmaster Cheng Man Ch'ing stated three conditions a student of Taijiquan must meet:

- 1) Getting correct teaching
- 2) Perseverance
- 3) Having a natural talent for the art.

The first two were critical, and the absence of natural talent could be overcome with arduous practice.

Regarding getting correct teaching, it always surprised me that the vast majority of my beginning Taiji students had no idea what Taiji really was—or any interest in its history or traditions. Nor did they have any understanding about what constituted a qualified teacher.

So the first requisite of being a real Taiji student is doing preliminary research about the art, and what constitutes a qualified

teacher. This does not have to be a profound scholarly endeavor, but simply acquiring basic information about the origins, purposes, and traditions of the art. A friend of mine who had spent some years in China once shared an interesting observation. He said that in China, where one sees hundreds of people practicing Taijiquan every morning in the parks of any city or town, everyone “gets” Taiji—even if they do not practice themselves. They have a kind of gut-level feeling and understanding of the art, even if they are not fully aware of the history of the art, or of the specific fine points.

My friend analogized this to baseball in the U.S. Virtually all Americans “get” baseball, even if they are not rabid aficionados or have not played much baseball themselves. In America, most people still don’t really “get” Taiji, even though it has become a household word in the past few decades.

So a prospective beginner really must acquire a rudimentary knowledge of what Taiji is all about **before** seeking out a class or teacher. Just a short time researching on the Internet will do.

### A real Teacher must have three primary qualifications:

- 1) A Lineage—that is a connection with a series of recognized masters who can trace their roots back to the founders of the art.
- 2) An awareness of the entire Taiji System. That is—even if they do not actively practice the martial aspect in depth—they must know the defensive “applications” of each movement, be conversant at least with the rudiments of two-person work, such as “Push Hands,” and preferably know at least one Taiji weapon, such as the Walking Stick, Saber, or Sword. A really good teacher will know all the weapon sets, plus the rarely-taught Taiji Staff and Spear practices. A qualified teacher must also know specific techniques for developing Intrinsic Energy.
- 3) Honesty in directing students to the best teacher for their real needs.

This last requisite deserves a bit of

**explanation:** Many Taiji teachers, particularly some very traditional masters, are very proud of their lineages and their particular style of the art. They might describe their lineage or style as “the best,” or “the only real” style of Taiji. While pride in their lineage is certainly admirable, being overly devoted to their own style may work against the best interest of their students.

Sometimes teachers are extremely offended or upset when one of their students wants to learn from another teacher. This sort of very uncomfortable situation happened to me personally, when I wanted to broaden my studies and leave my first teacher. From then on I resolved to always do my best to enhance my students’ real needs, even if that required their leaving my school.

**A personal example will illustrate this:** I once had a student who was extremely motivated to learn Taiji. He loved martial arts in general, and Taiji was the first one he had chosen to study in a formal setting. He practiced assiduously. He came to every class, and was an ideal student in every way.

But he grew increasingly frustrated because he felt he could not “relax” sufficiently to do the Taijiquan forms correctly. He loved to express his energy outwardly and told me he felt painfully constrained while trying to keep his external energy in check during the “internal” Taiji Solo Form. One day he somewhat hesitantly informed me that he had visited a Praying Mantis studio and absolutely loved what he saw. He was courteous enough to request my “permission” for him to study Praying Mantis!

I did a bit of research and found that the school he had visited was absolutely legitimate and was headed by a genuine master with a superb lineage. I immediately recommended most heartily that my student leave my school and join the Praying Mantis academy. He did—and came back to call on me several years later to tell me that he was totally devoted to his new style, and that he was now one of the best students in the academy and an assistant instructor.

I realized then how important it was for any teacher to be able to respect a student's real needs and direct them to the appropriate venue for learning the art that will suit them best. The great teacher T.T. Liang was a brilliant exemplar in this regard, and always encouraged his students to broaden their studies with other teachers. "You must learn from many teachers, read many books. But only through serious practice can you discover the truth for yourself," he said. Check out Master Liang's book *Tai Chi Ch'uan for Health and Self Defense* for more about T.T. Liang and his teaching.

Assuming that a prospective student has found a "real" Taiji teacher, here are some guidelines for Taijiquan study itself:

### The Essential Qualifications for a Real Taiji Student:

1) **BEING TEACHABLE**—that is being truly open minded and receptive to the teaching. This would seem to be obvious, but it is amazing how many students come to Taiji with their own opinions, prejudices, or—in the case of students with some prior experience—holding on to what they learned previously.

When I was studying with T.T. Liang, I often witnessed students of other teachers coming to call on him and asking him questions about technique or practice. As soon as he would make a suggestion, the student would immediately start arguing, telling him that they had learned something different from another master. This totally blew my mind!! Imagine coming to a grandmaster (T.T. Liang) who had immense experience and an unparalleled lineage, asking a question—and then start arguing when the Master replied!

Liang, in his usual modest way, would then advise the visitor to return to their own teacher, who obviously had "higher rank" than his own. Liang never got angry or defensive, he just would tell the visitor that his own knowledge was "limited," and then chortle a bit when the visitor had left—and say slyly, "I can teach him nothing. . ."



*From left to right: Paul Abdella, Ray Hayward, Paul Gallagher, & Master T.T. Liang*

Those "students" never realized what they had missed! As the somewhat clichéd old Zen story describes, always come to a teacher with an empty teacup and be ready to receive **any** teaching from a high master as the blessing which it truly is.

Remember—be teachable!

2) **BEING WILLING TO ACCEPT "INCONVENIENCE."** I rented a teaching studio space midway between two Massachusetts college towns, about 5 miles from each one. I always found it quite fascinating that a large number of prospective students would call me on the phone, gush about how desperately they had always wanted to study Taiji—how deeply they felt it could transform their whole life—and then decide that a five mile drive from their home to my teaching studio was "too far" or "to inconvenient."

In old China, there was a tradition that a student would be rebuffed on the first two approaches to a teacher—and **might** be accepted provisionally on the third, if s/he had the right attitude and the Master felt the student had the right degree of teachability, and the proper temperament for study. A couple of well-chosen gifts to the Master on the first two visits was always welcomed also. . . .

Around the same time as prospective students were complaining to me that driving 5 miles each way to class one evening a week was too "inconvenient," one of my students informed me that he had decided to travel to Taiwan and study martial arts with a traditional master.

He was a small and slender Asian Studies major at a local university, and was quite skilled in reading, writing, and speaking Chinese.

He went to Taipei and after numerous inquiries, found that many people recommended a certain master known only as “Shifu,” who taught at an isolated Buddhist temple in the mountainous middle of the island. He made his way to the monastery, and was allowed to meet with the abbot (who was the “Shifu”). The Abbot told him that he could never be accepted as a student and had made the difficult trip in vain.

A month later, my student returned for a second try. This time Shifu appeared quite angry about being disturbed again and told my student in no uncertain terms to stay away and not come back.

Another six weeks went by, and my student made a third trip to the temple. This time the exasperated Shifu said he could stay—but he could not learn martial arts. If he would don the gray robes of the Buddhist monk and shave his head, he would be allowed to remain at the temple, and do manual work for his keep. My student readily agreed.

Once he had begun living at the temple, my student would send me a monthly letter telling me how he was doing. Living there was “inconvenient” indeed! There was no plumbing of any sort, so my student was tasked with going down the steep mountain path to a clear stream which ran at the foot of the hill, and bringing up water for cooking, cleaning, and other needs.

On the first day, he descended the footpath to the stream, carrying two large wooden buckets, suspended on each end of a long pole. He stooped down, filled the buckets, and when he tried to stand up, he realized he was not strong enough even to stand up with the pole on his shoulder and the buckets full—to say nothing about carrying the full buckets up the hill. So he emptied about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of each bucket, and then slowly and painfully trudged up the precipitous path to the temple.

As soon as Shifu saw him, he seemed to go ballistic—yelling and screaming about the

“lazy and good for nothing” young whelp he had just admitted to the temple. He was ordered to go down to the stream and back as many times as necessary to bring up the requisite supply of water. After that he spent the day and evening doing manual work around the temple.

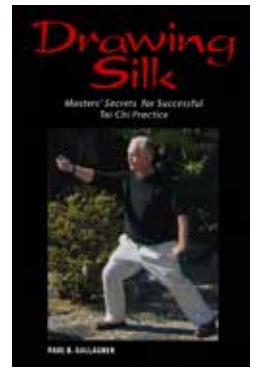
He would arise at 3:30 each morning to meditate, chant sutras, and copy out sutras in elegant calligraphy, then begin his water-carrying and his other chores for the day. Although some of the monks practiced Shaolin martial arts, my student was never allowed any instruction.

His letters to me became more and more despairing. One day after about six months, he went down to the stream, filled the buckets, and was on his way up the path when he suddenly realized that he was carrying **full** buckets, and ascending the path at a good pace, without even breaking a sweat. Like a “Eureka!” experience, he realized that he was many times stronger than when he had arrived, and that the grueling water-carrying chore was actually **training**. Suddenly he was elated.

A few more months went by and one day the Master invited him to go on “herb walks” along the numerous mountain paths. My student was delighted at this break in the exhausting temple routine, and at his privilege in having some time alone with the Master. From time to time Shifu would point out a plant, describe its healing properties, what part of the plant to use, when to gather it, etc. It seemed like a nice way to spend a few hours. . . .

One of the monks unexpectedly became ill with a severe cold and congestion. Shifu ordered my student to gather the required herbs and prepare them. My student replied that he had no knowledge whatever of herbal medicine and there was no way he could formulate a remedy. Again, Shifu exploded. . . . “What in the world do you think we were doing during the herb walks? I expected you to know every herb I showed you, and how to use it properly! You have wasted my time. . . .”

My student realized that the herb walks were



*Drawing Silk: Masters' Secrets for Successful Tai Chi Practice.*

*By Paul Gallagher*

more training—and that indeed everything that happened at the temple was training—there wasn't any activity that was **not** training.

He remained at the temple about 5 years, and never did learn formal martial arts. But when he returned and visited me, he was a superb calligrapher, quite adept in herbal medicine and Qigong, and was immensely strong and self-confident. He was teachable and willing to accept “inconvenience”—and said it was greatest experience of his life!

**3) BEING WILLING TO PRACTICE!** This is self-explanatory. Serious practice of Taijiquan will literally transform your body and mind (for the better!), but this deep alchemy must be done continuously for a long period of time. The Chinese expression for Taijiquan practice is to “cultivate,” just as it is for Qigong or Taoist training. Slow and steady, over a long stretch of time, like a farmer cultivating fields over a period of years. The great Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki once compared Zen training to “getting wet in a fog.” He said that if you are drenched in a heavy rainstorm, it is easy to dry off and warm up. But if you walk for a long period in heavy fog, the moisture seems to permeate your very bones, and will take a long time to dry out.

I always thought real Taijiquan practice quite resembled “getting wet in a fog.”

#### **4) DEVELOPING A COURAGEOUS SPIRIT.**

Since Taijiquan is a martial art, one oft-neglected aspect of the training is developing a courageous spirit. Exactly what that means will vary from person to person. But we all know deep in our hearts when courage is called for and what we would need to do to act courageously in a given situation. If we consistently cultivate our Qi and Spirit, we will be able to stand like Confucius and declare, “When I am in harmony with the Command of Heaven I can face an army of 3000 men and my countenance will not change.”

The only times Chan ever reprimanded me was when I missed two of his classes (over a period of 4½ years!) One time I was deathly ill with the flu and he upbraided me for not training hard enough. If I was **really** training, said he, I would never become ill. The second time was when I stayed home during a 15 inch snowfall, rather than drive 240 miles from Massachusetts to New York. That time, Chan said that if I was a **genuine** martial artist I would not let anything deter me from arriving at class in a timely manner.

Courage!



*Paul B. Gallagher  
1944-2023*

