Since ancient times there have been an abundance of schools promoting Chinese wushu. Each is alike, in that successive generations have devoted great effort, striving to resolve technical skills with theory and philosophy—but few have really succeeded.

If a student makes an effort to put in a day of practice, he or she gains the achievement of that one day of work. But over months and years one may accumulate expertise naturally. As the saying goes: ‘Drops falling, if they fall constantly, will bore through a stone’.

Part of the rich cultural heritage of China, taijiquan is an art whose slow, soft forms disguise great power—this is well encapsulated in another time honoured saying: ‘Inside cotton, a hidden needle’. The technical, physiological, and mechanical principals are in fact rooted in a philosophy.

Those who aspire to mastery must go through definite stages for an appropriate length of time and, although guidance from a quality instructor and exchange with friends are necessary, the critical element is regular daily practice. One can discuss and analyze all day long, contemplate for years and yet—still lack the gong fu necessary to overcome an adversary—one remains like a beginner without even one day’s accomplishment. Men and women, young and old—if they train morning and evening, through hot and cold, without breaks and exceptions—will be successful. Indeed, the ancients said that it is wiser to practice than to ponder, and learners of taijiquan—men and women, young and old—will get the best possible results if they keep at it all the year round.

Now, from north to south, from the Huang to the Yangzi rivers, great numbers of people are taking up the study of taijiquan and this bodes well for the future of wushu. We do not lack for acolytes, but while many of these enthusiasts possess boundless potential and train in a thoughtful and dedicated manner, most nevertheless fail to avoid two common pitfalls. The first involves particularly talented, perhaps younger or stronger individuals, who grasp basic skills and concepts quickly but grow complacent and bored before reaching a truly high level of skill and understanding. Though they initially surpass their classmates, later they do not succeed. The second befalls individuals who, anxious to progress rapidly, try learn everything—barehand forms, straight-sword, sabre, spear—within a short space of time. Though they can ‘paint a gourd by copying a pattern’ their flaws: in direction and sequencing; upper and lower body coordination; balance between inner and outer—are immediately apparent to the expert. To correct their practice every form needs to be rectified, although what has been repaired in the morning will be spoiled again by the evening. In wushu circles we say, ‘Learning taijiquan is easy; correcting it is difficult’. The point is: people try to learn too quickly and delude themselves and others. Their mistakes are passed on to future generations and great harm is done to the art.

In studying taijiquan, first learn the quan jia posture by posture, according to the curriculum, minding carefully the instructor’s every posture and gesture. In studying the form, pay attention to ‘nei’, ‘wai’, ‘shang’ and ‘xia’. Nei suggests mindfulness rather than the use of clumsy force. Wai refers to the nimble movement achieved by relaxation of the outer limbs, the shoulders and the elbows; also to sequencing movement from the feet to the legs to the waist in a soft and continuous fashion. Shang advises emptying the neck to allow energy to reach the head-top, while xia means sinking the qi to the dantian. Novices should reflect on the important guidelines above, persistently correcting the basics during practice without looking for short-cuts or instant results. Slow and steady progress will guarantee long term benefits. Avoid violating the principles early on and there will be little or nothing to correct later.

Do not constrain the breath with mouth and belly tension. Keep the joints of the body relaxed, allowing unconstricted and natural gesture. These things are often said by wushu practitioners, but as soon as they start to move—turning the body, kicking the legs or twisting the waist—their breath becomes heavy and their stepping staggers. This is a defect of stopping the breath and overexertion.
Practitioners should observe these points:

1. **Keep the head erect, inclining it neither forward nor backward.** There is an expression: ‘As if something sits on your head; careful not to let it fall’. Avoid stiffening the neck however, instead ‘suspend’, so that the eyes, while looking levelly forward, follow the turning of the body. Though the eyes seem to gaze into emptiness, they are actually a very important component in ‘whole body movement’. The mouth is slightly open, yet slightly closed. Inhale through the nose, exhale through the mouth, breathing naturally. If saliva is secreted from below the tongue, swallow it rather than spitting out.

2. **Maintain an upright torso; keep the spine and tailbone vertical.** As movements open and close, the chest sinks slightly, the back opens and the shoulders relax, allowing the waist to turn flexibly. Beginners must adhere to these guidelines, otherwise, in spite of long years of practice, their actions will become rigid and lifeless, and improvement will be difficult.

3. **The joints of the arms must relax, allowing the shoulders to sink and the elbows to drop.** The palms extend slightly with the fingertips slightly bent. The yi mobilizes qi into the fingers. As the benefits of practice accrue, internal energy consolidates, becoming lively and bringing forth unusual abilities.

4. **Step like a cat, carefully distinguishing empty and full.** When one leg is firmly weighted, the other is described as ‘empty’. If weight is shifted to the left, the left is full and the right is empty. If shifted to the right, the right is full and the left is empty. However, the leg described as ‘empty’, is not completely without substance—it still possesses residual intention and the potential for extension and contraction. The ‘full’ leg is firmly settled but not caused to exert strenuously. If one over-exerts or over-extends the leg, the torso will be caused to lean forward, causing a loss of balance which creates defensive vulnerabilities.

5. **There are two basic types of kicking: upward open-toe separating kicks and downward sitting-heel thumping kicks.** In the first, pay attention to the tip of the foot; whereas in heel kicks, pay attention to the entire sole of the foot. To wherever the yi is mobilized, the qi extends and the jin follows. The joints must be relaxed and open if one is to kick with stability and power. Here one is especially likely to over-exert or bend forward, destabilizing the body and weakening the kick.

Learning taijiquan begins with the taiji bare-hand form or ‘long fist’. This is followed by: dan shou tuishou fa, ding bu tuishou, huo bu tuishou, dalû, sanshou and eventually weapons: taijijian, taijidao and taijiqiang.

Practice regularly, at least once per day: ideally twice in the morning and/or twice before bedtime—if possible, practice seven or eight times throughout the day. The best places to practice are open courtyard gardens or large rooms with good air circulation and plenty of natural light. Avoid practicing in strong wind, dark, damp or dirty places, especially those with poor air quality, as the breath naturally deepens during practice and harm to the lungs or illness could occur. Avoid practicing immediately following a large meal or after drinking alcohol.

Wear loose, comfortable, natural clothing and comfortable cloth shoes. If perspiring during practice, do not take off too much clothing or rinse with cold water so as to avoid catching cold.

**Drawing of Yang Chengfu by Sam Masich (1985).**

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1 Narrated to Zhang Hongkui.

2 The long barehand routine, also known as: chángquán (長拳).


4 xū lìng díng jìn (虛領頂勁) ‘emptiness led to the top’ energy.
