

Mastering Taijiquan

by Sam Masich



Greater than the sum

It is interesting to observe what sends taiji practitioners into heated debate. It seems we are often driven to fits of criticism by motives of self justification. I have heard countless lamentations about the loss of traditional forms in *taijiquan* and, if I am honest with myself, can also tread self-righteously along these byways without much provocation. The incessant promotion of the latest pop short forms, the dearth of principled push-hands training globally, the ever-changing gymnastic

requirements of official taiji forms developed by the China Wushu Association—all these are *don't-get-me-started* issues.

Of course I, like most taiji players, value the practices I've devoted myself to over the years and decades and wouldn't have continued in them without some belief that they were worthy of effort. I would defend my approach to the art with considerable conviction and so appreciate it when others do as well. Still, I always feel uneasy when debates fall into

either: *'they don't do it traditionally'*—where 'traditionally' often reveals a thinly disguised ideology rather than researched observation; or, *'in our style we do it like this'*—where 'like this' is more a disclosure of obsessive fixation around a cherished method or a pet peeve.

Many of the 'this style versus that style' debates regarding the direction the art is taking somehow miss a fundamental point, this being the importance of promoting *taijiquan* styles in their wholeness. Before the last half of the 20th century, this is what taiji masters did. Although participation in the art has surged, there does not seem to be a proportionate increase in the numbers of serious, full curriculum practitioners or instructors. From the standpoint of maintaining and continuing the development of traditional *taijiquan*, this may be deemed a crisis.

It was an ambition for the innovators of all schools of Chinese martial arts to develop a fully rounded syllabus of training—this being passed down from master to master through generations. Virtually all traditional systems of *wushu* present a central theory elucidated by a full and systematic course of study. The training regimen was designed to adhere to the central principles around which the art was based, theory and practice being inseparable. This is particularly true of traditional *taijiquan* which offers a plentiful curriculum developed in the light of a rich literary storehouse.

One would not attend university to become a physician and only take preferred miscellaneous courses. Acquiring reasonable expertise in a full *taijiquan* curriculum could be likened to doing a master's degree as the thorough learning of an entire curriculum takes somewhere between four to six years depending on student aptitude, time commitment and training circumstances.

The regimen of practices is designed to take the learner, in a principled way, through a wide range of experiences equipping him or her with a complete set of skills which can be employed under any circumstances. It can be argued that full understanding of early items in the curriculum and of the literature associated with the art cannot really be achieved until one has embodied the whole training. In this

important sense, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

For example, it is difficult, if not impossible, to truly understand a basic solo barehand form without studying push-hands and the applications of that form. Likewise, it is improbable that one will achieve any high level of skill in *tuishou* by foregoing traditional studies and only practicing freestyle. Fixed-step push-hands practices are deepened by an understanding of moving-step drills and barehand training is greatly enhanced by the study of weapons.

It is through the interplay of these yin-yang dichotomies—solo and partner work, barehand and weapons training, theory and practice—that the art does its transformative work. The traditional styles evolved into their late 19th and early 20th century forms enabling practitioners to experience full understanding and mastery of the art.

Patchwork

There are of course, examples of schools offering a full and intact taiji curriculum but this is increasingly rare. A plethora of new simplified and synthetic solo forms appear yearly in the marketplace, often devoid of any reference to any other aspects of the art. The recent fusion—and confusion—of *taijiquan* with *qigong* gives little clue to masses of new practitioners what *taijiquan* is, how it works or what it is for. The dominance of Cheng Man-ch'ing's highly abbreviated syllabus in the West for the last forty years has siphoned off thousands of potential full curriculum candidates as well.

When eager new taiji-fans do cotton on to the idea that there is something more to all this and feel moved to seek out something of greater range, they are deluged with data in the form of books, DVDs and YouTube clips, and confronted with an inverse scarcity of instructors fully versed or qualified in the entire syllabus of any style. This has led to a generation of what might be called 'taiji bums'; enthusiasts seeking out patchwork solutions as they study odds and sods from various sources to gain some semblance of a complete curriculum.



These days taiji practitioners typically learn a basic solo barehand routine, some *qigong*/standing practices, a weapon (usually straight-sword) and perhaps a few push-hands drills. This is most often heavily augmented with 'freestyle' push-hands workouts (a practice which exists nowhere in any formal traditional *taijiquan* curriculum or writing but which dominates *taijiquan* training worldwide). While this is certainly enough to give a recreational practitioner a general sense of the art, it must be asked whether a deeper and fuller experience and understanding couldn't be accomplished through an actual traditional curriculum.

When teachers of high calibre are to be found they are often unwilling or unable to teach their whole system due to discouragements such as high dropout levels, time versus finance constraints, student usurpation and other frustrations prevalent in the modern mentoring-scape. There is little personal incentive today for teachers to develop the next generation of traditional torchbearers in the whole-art sense. Although there is much commerce done in the taiji teaching trade in modern times, it just doesn't pay to try to appeal to serious acolytes.

While there is certainly nothing wrong in studying with many teachers to gain varied perspectives and new movement vocabulary, the result seems to be the formation of a taiji community composed largely of 'forms collectors'. While the open-mindedness of

this approach may have real benefits for taiji society, building one's repertoire in this fashion may lead in the long run, to an endemic problem as successive generations of teachers pass down increasingly hodgepodge curricula.

What is a full curriculum?

This issue of full curriculum study is complicated by issues arising both in interpretation and in historical fact. *Taijiquan* styles developed over generations and vary greatly based on factors such as: from which point in history the curriculum is being studied, which branch of a particular style is being studied and which aspects of the style were made known to the school promoting the curriculum. Indeed, given the previously mentioned tendency toward self-justification, promoters of various styles have been known to depict taiji history/lineage/curriculum in a just-so manner as to create justification for their own particular body of knowledge. Anyone can say anything they like about these issues—and they do.

Regardless of the particulars however, a full curriculum in any style of Chinese martial arts will include: *preparatory practices; solo and partner bare-hand forms and exercises; solo and partner short and long weapons forms and exercises*. In Chen-style Taijiquan for example, the curriculum is broadly outlined as follows:

1. *Zhanzhuang* 站桩 (Standing Post)
2. *Cansigong* 蠶絲工 (Silk Reeling Training)



3. *Taolu* 套路 (Bare-hand Forms)
4. *Wuqi* 武器 (Weapons)
5. *Tuishou* 推手 (Push-hand)
6. *Fangshengshu* 防身術 (Applications)

Within *wuqi*, there exist several weapons routines (sabre, straight-sword, pole/spear, halberd, double sabre, double straight-sword) and depending on the branch there can be even more. Likewise there are multiple forms, drills and practices within each of the six outlined categories. In most Chen schools these various aspects will be taught in a somewhat intermingled fashion. The practical teachings are normally interspersed with wisdom around principled practice and in some cases guidance toward improvement of personal character qualities derived from Chen family ancestral doctrine.

In the case of Yang-style Taijiquan the curriculum is structured in consonance with the teachings of the Taijiquan Classics which essentially submit the possibility of spiritual illumination (*shenming* 神明) through a mastery of the thirteen powers. These thirteen can be subdivided into, those having to do with the legs and waist (the *wubu* or ‘five stance phases’), and eight core kinetic possibilities which are dependent on an intact leg/waist structure. Ingeniously, the ‘eight gates’ (*bamen* 八門) study is broken into two main categories, ‘the square’ and ‘the diagonal’ (*sizheng* 四正 and *siyu* 四隅). These function interdependently to manage a vast range of martial situations. The standing practices,

solo bare-hand form and push-hands training are crafted to take the learner progressively into the square/diagonal study. The work then continues to extend outward through weapons training.

The full curriculum in my own Yang-style Taijiquan program looks something like this:

1. Taiji Preparation studies:
Zhanzhuang 站樁 (Standing Post)
Luodian Qigong 落點氣功 (Breath Placement Training)
Taijigongli 太極功力 (Taiji strength, flexibility and conditioning training)
2. Taiji Solo bare hand:
Yang-shi Taijiquan (108) 楊式太極拳套路 (Yang-style Taijiquan solo form)
37 Essential Forms 三十七式楊式太極拳
3. Taiji Push-hands:
Bapan Jiazi Dingbu Tuishou 八盤架子定步推手 (Eight preparatory fixed-step drills)
Sizheng Tuishou 四正推手 (Four-square Push-hands. Fixed and moving variations)
Dalu 大鬮 (Large Rolling)
4. Taiji Sparring:
Yang-shi Taijisanshou 楊式太極散手 (Yang-style Taiji Sanshou: 88 form, mix & freestyle)
5. Taiji Sabre:
Yang-shi Taijidaofa 13 楊式太極刀 (Yang-style solo sabre—‘Fu Zhongwen’)
Yang-shi Taijidaofa 32 楊式太極刀 (Yang-style solo sabre—‘Chen Yanlin’)

Yang-shi Taijidaofa Shiyong 楊式太極刀法實用 (Yang-style Taijidaofa Applications)
Shisanshi Dao 十三勢刀 (13 Power Sabre—solo & partner training)

6. Taiji Straight-sword:
Yang-shi Taijijian (54) 楊式太極劍 (Yang-style solo straight-sword)
Shisanshi Taijijian 十三太極勢劍 (13 Power Taiji Sword—solo & partner training)

7. Taiji Spear & Halberd:
Shisanshi Taijiqiang 太極十三勢槍 (Yang-style 13 Power Spear—solo & partner training)
Sanfa Taijiji 太極戟三勁 (Taiji three method Halberd—solo & partner training)

8. Taiji Literature
Taijiquan Jing, Yangjia 40 Pianzhang 太極拳經, 楊家四十篇章 (Taijiquan Classics, Yang-family Forty Chapters and other literature)

While the details of a full curriculum program will vary from teacher to teacher even within a style, the list above gives an accurate representation of a traditional *taijiquan* program. Each facet is considered to be integral to the understanding of what the art is and how it is intended to function in theory and in practice. Generally the biggest differences occur around preparation practices, sparring approaches and the long weapons. Some styles also include apparatuses like the fan (扇), double fan, the staff (杆) and other weapons which were not documented in former times.

Many books released over the last century

have purported to be ‘complete’ *taijiquan* books. The better ones at least give a summary of a full curriculum and some are excellent, but for the most part, these publications have done a poor job of presenting the full method of any *taijiquan* system. There are some notable exceptions. *Tseng Ju-Pai* attempted something akin to a full Yang-style curriculum in two volumes in 1975 and *Dr. Yang Jwing Ming* presented his full version of Yang syllabus (sans sabre and spear) in 1981. The best full curriculum book remains *Chen Yanlin’s* (陳炎林) controversial 1943 manual: ‘Taiji Boxing, Sabre, Sword, Pole, Sparring Compiled’ (*Taiji Quan, Dao, Jian, Gun, Sanshou Hebian* 太極拳刀劍桿散手). Although there are several chapters of this book available in English and French the work has yet to be translated in its entirety.

What ‘full’ has to offer

I can imagine some readers thinking, ‘Well this is all well and good for people wanting to become teachers and masters but I just do taiji for me. I don’t need to learn all that stuff to be satisfied.’ Many recreational *taijiquan* players are very serious about their practice. They exercise their form daily, go to classes regularly and attend workshops and events because of a real interest in the art. Often they have learned many different forms and still feel something missing in their basic understanding—the difference between snacking on bits of this and that versus getting one’s teeth into something deeply nutritious.

It’s possible to practice many forms of very different character and remain always at the same skill level. Like a music enthusiast learning to play song after song in the same way without deepening understanding of the music and their instrument, many taiji players cruise along for years and even decades, without quite getting it. They read books, watch videos and go to workshops but always with the same eyes—eyes searching for something to help them break through.

This is what the curriculum does. The preparation work breaks ground for the solo form. This in turn sets the conditions for basic partner practice, then advanced and so on. Each new stage of the process stretches the player, as in the making of a Chinese sword, where each beat extends the block of raw steel until it can be folded back on itself, lengthening, strengthening and becoming malleable. Step-by-step one is moved past their limitations, through their resistances and beyond their expectations into the very world of grace, coordination and connection that first drew them to taiji. Learning to experience oneself in new ways through taiji and never getting bored—this is not only for elite players, its for every player.

Mastering a full curriculum in taiji is not about checking off boxes on a list or collecting certificates, its about entering a world where a new type of dialogue can occur both with one’s playmates and with oneself. Its about touching into and even living through

something ancient, something classic and something profound. Ultimately everything in the whole world of *taijiquan* can be found in the full curriculum study.

In the past the masters said, ‘If it doesn’t contain the thirteen powers, it cannot be called *taijiquan*.’ Today it’s not uncommon to find practitioners who don’t even know what this refers to. *Taijiquan* requires serious effort but it offers high benefit. So there are two questions: Is the art worthy of my effort? And, am I worthy of its benefits? To change one’s thinking, to value one’s own commitment, to go the longer path up the higher mountain.

Only by the willingness of teachers to pass down, and students to learn, whole *taijiquan* systems, can the technical knowledge and holistic insight gained over generations be preserved. To push ourselves and our teachers is to keep a living art alive for future generations.

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