

Styles of Taijiquan

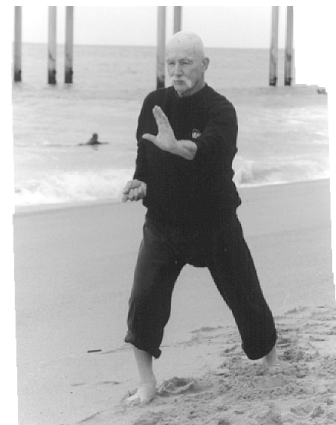
When most people think of the different styles of Taijiquan they usually draw to mind images of the 5 major styles; Chen, Yang, Wu, Hao (Wu) and Sun style taijiquan. Some more knowledgeable practitioners may even think of Zhao Bao, a lesser known but important style of taiji from Zhao Bao Zhen.

No matter which style of taiji you draw to mind there are inherent similarities shared by all styles of Taiji. First, all styles of Taiji are classified as internal martial arts, as opposed to external martial arts such as Karate, Taekwondo and Boxing. Internal basically indicates a method of martial training where the “soft overcomes the hard”. This method of training encourages relaxation, and yielding to incoming force in order to gain skill in redirecting the force to one’s advantage and naturally to the opponent’s disadvantage. Internal arts convey the idea of using the mind to direct internal energy, commonly referred to as training the Yi to direct the Qi. What is meant by this saying is that the taiji practitioner trains to develop a high level of skill in mindfulness, rather than relying on primarily on muscular strength and speed. This is not to imply that in studying internal arts one neglects strength training or quick reflexes, but in addition the taiji practitioner also pays close attention to the development, co-ordination and strength of connective tissue. The taiji practitioner works to; develop acute awareness of his posture at all times, become proficient in the use of efficient body mechanics, develop a keen sense of body positioning so as to be able to apply the least amount of force to gain the maximum amount of power. Many, but not all internal stylist work with a idea of cultivating “Qi” to increase their understanding and proficiency in taiji.

Tai chi practitioners of all styles subscribe to Yang Cheng Fu’s 10 Essential Principles of Taijiquan.

These principles are:

1. **The Head** is naturally suspended from the Crown Point
2. **Keep the Chest** relaxed while slightly stretching up the back.
3. **Relax the Waist**, the waist is like the flywheel
4. **Differentiate between Substantial and Insubstantial**
5. **Relax the Shoulders and Sink the Elbows**
6. **Use the Mind not Strength**
7. **Unity of the Upper Body and Lower Body**
8. **The Unity of Internal and External**
9. **Continuity without Interruption**
10. **Seeking Stillness in Movement**



Although all styles of taiji follow the principles outlined above, within each style of taiji there yet another three major divisions, namely: traditional, competition and health. Each category has its own desired outcome and thus is performed with a different end in mind.

If someone is primarily interested in learning taiji as a marital art, one should find an instructor that can teach traditional forms of taiji, with a clear understanding of that forms original usage of the movements. I find these instructors are rather difficult to find.

If someone is captivated by the balance, beauty and power of the competition forms, and wants to perform taiji like this, they need to find a good taiji coach. A good coach can help the student train for strength, flexibility and balance while knowing the particular intricacies of each competition form to better assist the individual towards this inspiring goal.

If one is primarily interested in pursuing taiji as a way to attain and maintain better health through the graceful, fluid movements of taiji, then that person should seek an instructor who has been carefully trained in this area. A qualified health practitioner of taiji will know how to avoid the dangerous movements found in many forms of taiji and will be highly skilled in preventing further injury to joints caused by poor alignment and improper body mechanics. These instructors should have a high level of understanding of proper alignment, good body mechanics, be able to recognize if the student is working out of their comfort zone, as well as to be able to modify movements to accommodate students with special needs or health concerns.

Dr. Lam after having studied closely under the supervision of two of the most famous creators of the competition forms wisely saw ways he could modify the forms even further to bring the health benefits of taiji to more people by eliminating the difficult and dangerous movements found in many of the competition forms, thereby making taiji accessible to anyone interested in learning this ancient powerful and graceful art form as a way to improve their physical, mental and spiritual health.

“Is there anyone in the world whose idea of being truly healthy would not include, along with a healthy body, a fine mind combined with an ease of disposition?” Sophia Delza

These are the gifts practicing taiji can bring.

A toast to your health!

Troyce Thome

