

A Brief Introduction to Tai Chi Chuan and Selecting a Tai Chi School



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ULTIMATE GUIDE TO TAI CHI : THE BEST OF INSIDE KUNG-FU

What Is Tai Chi Chuan?

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ew people know the truth about tai chi chuan. Is it a mysterious occult art, an exercise for old people, a Walter Mitty martial art for hippie types afraid to get involved with "real" martial arts, a magical ritual bringing secret inner strength to the initiates, or a deadly dance of death? At one time or another, all these labels and more have been applied to tai chi chuan, the popular but often misunderstood internal martial art of China.

Tai chi chuan is many things to many people. To some, it is an esoteric, dreamlike ballet. Many believe it is a unique technique of health, consisting of nourishing exercises for developing peace and harmony in mind and body, while to others it is a devastating martial art whose mastery endows the expert with the mysterious power to toy with one or more assailants as easily as a cat plays with a mouse.

Not only are there different interpretations — and five major styles of the art (each with its own set of forms) but there also are many minor schools and little-known versions of the art, some of which are offshoots of the five major systems while others are independent family styles. Moreover, within tai chi chuan styles, there is often a great divergence in focus among teachers. Some stress the development of internal health only, while others emphasize the martial art. Still others place importance on the development of life force energy, or *chi*.

So, how does one go about finding the "real thing?" The best weapon you can have is knowledge. This introduction to the art distills the wisdom of some of America's influential and highly respected tai chi chuan instructors. I also have stirred into the pot my experience of watching tai chi chuan emerge from a cloud of secrecy and obscurity over the last fifteen years to a world-renowned internal health exercise and martial art. In selecting a school of tai chi chuan, it will help you to know what tai chi chuan was intended to be by its original creators. Examining the history and evolution of the art can often shed some light on its purpose and true intentions, as well as its relevance in our own quest to fulfill our personal needs.

HISTORICAL ORIGINS

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he history of tai chi chuan is fragmentary at best. Many stories exist concerning the founding and creation of this legendary art. Research by a famous martial arts master and scholar, Tang Hao, during the 1930s indicates that tai chi chuan, or "shadow-boxing" as it is often called, originated in Wenxian County of Henan Province, China, about the middle of the seventeenth century.

This was a period of great social upheaval, when the Ming dynasty was being replaced by the Qing dynasty. The historical founder of tai chi chuan was Chen Wang Ting, a powerful warrior and Wenxian County magistrate. Chen fought many battles defending the county's borders. In later life, he retired from society, disillusioned by fame and the hard-style warrior arts, and entered into a life of solitude and Taoist pursuits.

He devoted his spare time to working in the fields and creating a new form of boxing art, which was later to become known as tai chi chuan, the "grand ultimate fist." Chen Wang Ting created his art by combining his martial arts skills with the Taoist philosophy of yin and yang, Chinese medicine, and physical therapy.

He wanted to create an all-purpose exercise and martial art for the benefit of mind and body as well as self-protection. To do this, Chen borrowed from two forms of Chinese yoga. The first was *daoyin*, a technique coordinating mental energy with the bending and twisting of the body to activate the internal energy of *chi*. The second method was *tuna*, a series of deep-breathing exercises to stimulate the abdominal area for the activation of *chi* in the body's center of energy, or *dan tian*.

This addition to the coordinated actions of Chen's shadowboxing routines produced the first Chen style tai chi

chuan, a complete system of exercise characterized by the creation of inner and outer power development. Further developments added spiral-like twisting actions, alternately extending and withdrawing the limbs and tightening and loosening the muscles while mentally directing the *chi* to spread throughout the body. The *chi*, originating in the *dan tian*, a point three inches below the navel, moves systematically through the body by the gradual twisting of the waist and limbs during exercise. When this intrinsic energy reaches the extremities it returns to the *dan tian*.

Chen Wang Ting discovered that martial arts exercises practiced slowly in a harmonious fashion not only stimulated the *Jingluo* (the channels of energy which circulate the *chi* to all internal organs, bringing about increased health and well-being) but also resulted in strengthening offensive and defensive forces of the body. This had the effect of creating dramatic increases in explosive force, power, and speed for use in martial arts applications.

The tai chi chuan designed by Chen Wang Ting thus was both a martial and health promotion exercise. Tai chi chuan's original form was a practical, down-to-earth martial art. Yet, it also contained esoteric Taoist medical principles for the preservation and development of internal energy and power, and was meant to be a physical exercise to strengthen and tone the body. It was one of the first of what we now call "holistic" arts.

The Creation of New Styles

The Chen style of tai chi chuan was kept within the family and not taught to outsiders. Through the years, it was adapted and modified into many variations by other masters.

Tai chi chuan did not truly come into prominence until the eighteenth century, through the efforts of Yang Lu Chan, a former martial artist. Having been soundly defeated twice in boxing matches by a young member of the Chen family, Yang resolved to give up the study of all hard styles and steal the Chen family art. Disguised as a beggar, he took up residence with the Chen family and secretly watched its practice. Unknown to Yang, the grand master was aware of Yang's intentions and was secretly watching him. The grand master was so impressed with Yang that he broke the family tradition and consented to secretly teach Yang the entire method during early morning hours while the household slept. He believed this would ensure the spread of the art outside of the Chen family.

The Yang Style

Yang became a superlative tai chi chuan master, defeating all challengers, including even the members of the Chen household. He modified the style and opened a school of tai chi chuan in Beijing.

Yang softened the art of Chen Wang Ting by removing many of the more vigorous jumping tactics and stamping of the feet. His son Yang Chien-ho improved on the techniques for health by extending and expanding the movements into what is now called the big-style. This is the most famous version of Yang's method and one of the most popular in China.

The Two Wu Styles

Yang Lu Chan and his second son, Yang Ban-ho, taught a set of tai chi chuan called the small-style. This method was learned by a Manchu known as Quan You. The son of Quan You took the name of Wu Jianquan and taught his interpretation of the Yang tai chi chuan small-style to others. The *Wu jinquan* version now bears his name.

A third version, also called the Wu School, was created by Wu Yuxiang of Yongnian county around 1852. This version is a combination of the older Chen method learned from Yang Lu Chan and the new-style Chen method of Chen *qingping*. It is a compact set emphasizing body work and exertion of the inner power.

The Sun Style

The tai chi chuan of Wu Yuxiang was eventually absorbed by Sun Lu Tang, a superlative internal boxer already proficient in two other forms of the internal Taoist arts, *xingyiquan* boxing and *baguazhang*, the eight-diagram palm boxing. Sun combined the strong points of all three schools into his personal style.

Today, these styles and many other versions are taught in China, Europe, Australia, Japan, and North America. Each of the styles differs in appearance and sequence, yet all are essentially the same in structure and principles.

Total Tai Chi Chuan Training

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According to the Chinese masters, learning the total art takes many years, and true training will contain the following elements:

Meditation

The purpose of tai chi chuan meditation is to cultivate the chi force of the body. Most styles practice the standing forms of meditation, sometimes called "posting" or *jan-chung*. The student assumes a posture from the form or stands as though holding a large barrel. While the student is holding the chosen posture, the breath is controlled and the mind concentrates on the alchemical process of mixing and summoning energy in and around the arc of the *dan tian*.

Seated meditation, *ching-tso*, is optional in many schools. This technique is practiced by sitting on the floor or in a chair and centering the mind upon the navel point as in the standing method.

Chi Kung (Qigong)

Tai chi chuan styles often incorporate breathing techniques to blend the powers of the body/mind/spirit into a harmonious whole. The simplest forms are methods of deep breathing. One form is known as "postnatal breath," in which the diaphragm muscle is pressed downward as the student inhales and flexed upward on the exhalation. A second method, the "prenatal breath," reverses the postnatal breath. This method is said to be the way a fetus uses its abdomen in the womb to obtain energy from the mother. Other forms of *chi kung* involve coordinated arm movements, waist twisting, and vocal sounds, all used to increase the life forces.

The Tai Chi Form

A series of body movements linked together is a "set," or *hsing*. Depending on the style, the set may consist of approximately 44 to 108 separate movements. Each style has its own number of linked postures. The postures may vary greatly from style to style, but visually they all have a similar and distinctive effect unique to tai chi chuan. Some styles have more than one set, with each more advanced than the preceding.

With the exception of Chen style, almost all tai chi chuan beginner's forms are characterized by slow, even movements, often resembling someone swimming underwater or moving in slow motion. Chen also does this, but the set is punctuated with quick motions and stamping of the feet.

Later training can also involve faster practice. Fast practice of the form is designed to give those in the upper levels an understanding of the martial arts application as well as for aerobic benefit. No matter what level one achieves, the basic foundation of the tai chi chuan form is slow, even practice.

Push-Hands

Push-hands is a two-person exercise used to develop sensitivity and awareness of energy flow. By developing push-hands skill, one can neutralize and guide the force of another without opposing it. This is invaluable as a defensive technique; however, the principle also applies to learning to manage stress in everyday life. Push-hands teaches that it is not necessary to fight against an opposing force. One learns to go with the flow, borrowing energy from an attack and using only a small amount of force to topple a larger, more powerful one.

Push-hands is the beginning of martial arts skills, and excellent skills they are. The well-trained student who excels at push-hands after five to ten years should be quite capable of neutralizing and controlling the aggressive actions of an assailant. Masters of the technique can often toy with one or more trained attackers as easily as a cat playing with a cricket.

Weapons

Most schools teach weapons training as a method of developing extra power and extension of energy; the focus of weapons training is not on fighting or fencing in tai chi chuan. Students learn to use the saber, or "big knife," to develop waist strength and flexibility. The sword, a double-edged weapon, trains power and control in the wrists and forearms, while the spear, or lance, is used to enhance the ability to project intrinsic energy.

Benefits of Tai Chi Chuan: Fact and Fiction

Health and Serenity

The essential principle underlying claims of increased health and stress reduction is the mental attitude pervading all tai chi chuan practice. Practitioners are taught to develop a serene heart with a concentrated mind. As students learn to relax during performance of the form, they begin to develop an awareness of mind/body control. This results in increased self-worth and confidence. Tai chi chuan players discover that they create their own emotions and are responsible for their actions. Such knowledge allows a student to change undesirable aspects in his or her character, which can have wide-ranging benefit.

A decrease of physical and emotional tension resulting from regular tai chi chuan practice also stimulates certain areas of the brain responsible for controlling the body's immune system, thus promoting resistance to illness and infection. Clinical studies have shown the art to be effective in reducing high blood pressure and a host of other stress-related ailments. Tai chi chuan also is used as physical therapy, in China as well as in a number of progressive clinics in the United States, for the treatment of stress-related disorders.

Strength and Fitness

Teachers who claim that tai chi chuan training will develop aerobic fitness and muscular development should be avoided. No clinical evidence exists to support this claim. Aerobic capacity can be achieved only through an exercise form that places progressively increasing workloads on the cardiovascular system. The slow versions of tai chi chuan will not supply this benefit beyond a moderate range unless the speed and difficulty of the form are continually increased to match the student's personal aerobic target zone. Lowering the stances to increase resistance in the slow form will not, as some people claim, increase the cardiovascular benefit significantly to produce a training effect of sufficient duration to qualify as an aerobic activity.

However, some aerobic benefit can be realized by tai chi chuan beginners who are in poor physical condition. They may see gains in aerobic capacity and overall strength, but only until the body adjusts to the workload provided by the form. The increases will then level off, and no further gains in strength will take place without an increase in the intensity of the workload. Some tai chi chuan advocates claim they have seen little, "skinny" tai chi chuan players who were much stronger, than a well-muscled athlete.

Tai chi chuan players who have practiced well for five to ten years appear stronger because they use their bodies in a kinetically correct fashion and therefore make full use of the body's power through existing muscular strength, correct leverage, and a knowledge of momentum. Athletes with large muscles who have not had the benefit of the tai chi chuan principles often employ only brute force. They are frequently using their own muscles against themselves when performing feats of strength.

In the practice of tai chi chuan, overall muscular power in the upper torso does not increase a great deal as a result of forms practice. However, the kinetic efficiency of the body increases dramatically. This increase in ease of motion and correct posture alignment allows tai chi chuan practitioners to utilize up to 55 percent of their natural strength, in contrast to the untrained person, who utilizes only about 45 percent of available muscle efficiency. What appears to be an increase in muscular power to some observers is merely the process of learning to use the body correctly.

Selecting a Tai Chi School

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ith the knowledge base from the preceding discussion, to find a school that will suit your needs, you should first decide just what you expect to gain from studying tai chi chuan. Do you simply want better health, or do you want to learn tai chi chuan to defend yourself, or to enhance your internal power? Or all of the above? Getting in touch with your needs is a good idea before your start your quest.

Where to Look

In most large cities across the United States, there are usually several teachers available. Look in the yellow pages or ask around to compile a list of candidates. Checking with the local community college programs is another option. Anyone who wishes to study this art should identify as many teachers as possible in the area.

Then go visit the training sites of each. Some may be in a commercial building, a church hall, or a college gymnasium, while other classes are taught in parks. The authenticity of the art does not rely on the place in which it is practiced. However, for the beginner, it generally is best to have a quiet and serene environment in which to train.

If the site matches your needs, call the instructor and ask to visit an actual class. It's most helpful to observe both a beginner's and advanced class to determine how you might progress as a student of that particular school. Avoid a teacher who will not allow visitors during class time. Legitimate teachers have nothing to hide and do not conduct "secret" classes.

The "Master Teacher" Stereotype

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nce you have located a teacher to visit, do what the Chinese say: "Empty your cup." Let go of any expectations about how a competent tai chi chuan teacher should look, act, or sound.

Good and bad teachers come in all shapes, sizes, and nationalities and in both sexes. A teacher does not have to be Chinese to have a command of the art. A good teacher has to communicate the basic principles in a clear and concise manner — this is essential.

The hallmark of excellence in teaching is not how the teacher performs, but how he or she gets you to perform. No matter how many awards and trophies have been won or how perfectly the forms are executed for the class, if the person in question cannot explain in simple terms, or communicate in some way how you can do the technique, you are not looking at a good teacher!

Is Age Important?

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he age of a tai chi chuan instructor is purported to make a difference in imparting the art. A survey of a large cross section of teachers in America found that, generally, the younger teachers say "no," and the older teachers say "yes."

Chong Teh, a well-respected teacher of the Tai Chi Ch'uan Association in Atlanta has been studying the art for forty years and teaching since 1970. He states, "The age of the instructor makes a difference in the quality of instruction. An instructor needs to be mature in mind and body before teaching the internal arts. Such maturity requires a few years to develop."

Larry C. Eshelman from Butler, Pennsylvania, who has studied for nineteen years and taught Yang style for eight, responds, "Age is not as important as maturity. Instructors must know not only form, but also the essence of the art. Some people can learn at twelve, or even younger, and comprehend everything, while others cannot comprehend at forty-two. The quality of the lineage is the dominating factor. If the student who becomes a teacher had a good teacher and learned from those teachings, that person will mature in the art as well."

A practical approach is to look for an instructor with experience and maturity in the arts, placing less importance on chronological age than on the maturity of the instructor's skill. In other words, how long has the instructor been practicing and teaching the art to others on a daily basis? Most Chinese and Western teachers responded that a student can be considered for instructor level only after a period of daily practice, under the watchful eyes of the master, of from five to ten years.

The State of Tai Chi Chuan in America

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ai chi chuan is developing rapidly in America. It is being practiced by different people for different reasons. When you're looking for a school to fit your needs, one reason for your site visits is to determine the category of the school. The major divisions of schools can be grouped under three classifications; from conservative to ultramodern.

The Orthodox School

The orthodox school is the do-it-by-the-numbers school. It usually will have all the requirements for complete tai chi chuan training. Progress in this type of school is quite slow, depending on the degree of perfection and

strictness of adherence to the rules insisted upon by the teacher. The advantage to this method is that one learns the style as it was taught by the teacher's teacher, and his teacher before him. The disadvantage is that the method often is "frozen" in time, innovation, and change. The founding principles of the tai chi chuan philosophy are not encouraged. "We do it this way because it has always been done this way," is often the motto of the orthodox approach. Orthodox teachers come in two basic varieties. The first is usually an older person who learned the system in China or from a family member and has practiced it this way for most of his or her life. The second type is one to avoid, and that is the Western teacher who has become fanatically obsessed with the art and wants to talk, act, and live like the "old masters" of ancient China.

Kenneth Cohen has been teaching tai chi chuan for more than fifteen years. One might think a Westerner such as Cohen, who has taken the time to become an ordained Taoist priest, would fit into the latter category. Nothing is further from the truth. Cohen comments: "Beware of orthodoxy in the martial arts. Once, when I was teaching in a park, there was another tai chi chuan group nearby. The instructor announced in a rather loud voice, 'We believe that our tai chi chuan form is the only correct one. Once you know this, you have learned all you need to know.' In response I used a Taoist technique called 'put him on a pedestal of ashes and watch him sink.' I turned to my class and said, 'Our tai chi chuan form is the worst. If you want real, true, orthodox tai chi chuan, study with someone else.'"

The Liberal School

The liberal school of tai chi chuan thought is becoming more prevalent with the opening of China's cultural floodgates. Teachers and masters from China, both those from the wushu teams who teach the art for sport form competition and traditional old-world masters, are taking on a new policy of openness, sharing, and willingness to adapt to change when change is necessary.

Practitioners who fit into this category tend to be better educated and more open-minded. Often interested in the science behind the art and what it can do to promote friendship, goodwill, and health, these teachers and students are the pioneers of the latest innovations and research on tai chi being conducted around the world.

Liberals are often good teachers, with new and innovative methods, as well as explanations of how and why something works. The disadvantage is that liberal schools often do not encompass the whole art. Some place a strong emphasis on form and appearance and not internal development. There are liberal schools that offer all aspects, so it is best to shop around if liberal sounds like the place you want to take your empty cup.

Avant-Garde School

The avant-garde school is the school of "tai chi chuan beatniks." This category is composed of those who want to use the art as a method of spiritual enlightenment and divorce themselves totally from structured forms and any mention of martial arts, weapons training, or serious physical exercise. The avant-garde school usually makes up its own rules, forms, and meditation exercises, blending its brand of tai chi chuan with various forms of occult practices, from astrology to channeling.

Advocates of this style of practice are well-meaning, gentle souls who mostly are just waving their arms about and trying to experience the "good vibes." Although it's basically harmless, I cannot think of any advantages to joining this group if you are seeking, real tai chi chuan instruction.

Recognizing the Essentials of Form

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hen you visit a tai chi chuan class, you cannot see the internal energy, or whether or not the meditation is effective. So, you are left with observing the forms and the participants. Here are a few things to look for.

Hallmarks of Good Form

Slowness.

Beginners will execute all movements as slowly as possible. The form can be properly learned only if attention is paid to control of each muscle group, which makes working slowly essential. Chen style tai chi chuan will have some fast techniques throughout the form, but overall, the moves are slow and continuous.

Continuity.

The teacher's moves should flow continuously and without pause, from one to another, in an even interchange of postures. Pausing to adjust feet or body position during the form is not a good sign in a

teacher.

Relaxation.

The instructor's body should appear to be almost floating. Shoulders are never tensed, and the chest is never arched. The waist, shoulders, and arms should appear to move as though they were more liquid than solid bone and flesh. The face should appear calm and serene. There are no grimacing, teeth-gritting facial expressions. Each move should appear to give off waves of deep, quiet strength without a feeling of restrained tension.

Weight Distribution.

With the exception of the beginning of the form, the body weight will never be equally distributed on both legs for any length of time. The body will be erect. As the practitioner moves, the upper body is carried, riding above the hips. Weight is carried so that it presses directly into the earth through one foot at all times. There should be a great impression of being well centered.

Breathing.

The breath should be natural, in through the nose and out through the mouth. Exotic breathing methods or the rapid expulsion of breath have no place in the practice of the tai chi chuan slow form. The breath should be easy and not labored. Watch to see if the demonstrator is holding his or her breath during the performance. If the person appears winded after the form, something is amiss.

Posture.

The body is held erect, with knees bent. The head is up, with chin tucked slightly. The eyes are focused on the forward hand and do not glare. The chest is relaxed and not expanded, and the coccyx is tucked slightly. Actions should not look sleepy, limp, and listless. There should be an overall impression of relaxed yet alert energy permeating the entire posture.

Movement.

All movement will appear to be emanating from the waist and flow outward to the fingers in a smooth, uninterrupted flow. The feet are placed firmly in contact with the earth before weight is shifted to the front or back, and the knees never extend beyond the toes during a lunge. Look to see if the knees are kept in alignment over the toes, not twisted in or out over the instep or outside edge of the feet. The front foot will point in the direction the performer is facing at the completion of each move.

In good tai chi chuan, if you carefully watch the shoulders and arms, you will see that only one joint moves at a time. This movement will be executed so smoothly that it will appear to be a continuous flow, like that of a whip cracking in slow motion, with the momentum beginning in the handle, which is the waist, and proceeding in an orderly, almost undulating, action into the fingertips. The palms, when kept open, should have the fingers slightly spread and extended, with no exotic hand or finger formations. In punching, the closed fist is kept perpendicular and not parallel to the ground.

Taking the Pulse of the Class

When visiting the school, talk to the students and find out what they like about the program. Watch the classes and see if the students are having fun learning. It is best to avoid teachers who run their classes like a military camp or who never smile. Discipline is important and should be part of the class, but remember that tai chi chuan is based on Taoism, and Taoists do not take things as seriously as many of their Zen-oriented brothers in *budo*. Look for laughter.

Price Structure

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Prices vary from school to school. Some teachers charge nothing, as they have no overhead and merely want to share the art, while others with commercial schools have to pay the overhead and can charge fees ranging from \$30 to \$80 a month. The average price is around \$60 per month in a commercial school.

My last research turned up a few unscrupulous teachers in Canada who were so inflated with greed and self-importance that they had the audacity to charge up to \$150 or more for each technique. A student who learns the first three or four moves has to come back and pay again to get the next set of movements. All I can say is, "A fool and his money are soon parted."

Larry Eshelman explains the marketplace dynamics: "There are many traditional teachers who feel that ancient knowledge is sacred and no fee should be charged, while others charge a minimal fee and teach after finishing their day's work in their chosen professions. Both types often condemn the commercial schools, claiming that it is best to have only a few quality students who prove their worthiness to learn by enduring long hours of hardship and servitude to the master.

In our Western society, we have a different method of proving to the teacher the value of the instruction, by

paying what we feel the instruction is worth to us individually. Money is just another form of energy and has no value until it is used to purchase something that is considered valuable. Of course, if an exceptional prospect comes along who has no money with which to pay, rather than lose a good student, I will set up some form of barter with him to pay for his instruction.

All in all, you should pay what you think the instruction is worth, although if you are lucky enough to find a truly good teacher, the reward you receive will be beyond price."

Memberships

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Some schools require students to sign a membership contract. In most cases, this is for the legal protection of the commercial school and to act as a guarantee of the students' sincerity. I would advise anyone to avoid signing any contract of more than four months' duration. And do not sign anything until you have read and understood every word of the agreement.

The best advice is to first go see the class. Then, if there is a contract, read it over and go home and think about it, and in the morning if you still want to join, go ahead. In most states, you have from 43 to 72 hours to change your mind on a contractual arrangement with service-type businesses. So, if you get into class the first night and decide it is not for you, you can still legally back out. Check with your county courthouse or attorney on the regulations for your state.

Run, don't walk, out of any school claiming to teach traditional tai chi chuan that offers you a pay-up-front belt or sash program as an indication of your ability. There are no belts or sashes in "real" tai chi chuan, just what you know — and that should be enough, as it speaks for itself through your every action.

Reality Checks

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The only way to truly tell if the art is for you is to get your feet wet and keep your eyes and feelings open. Rex Eastman of the Kootenay T'ai Chi Ch'uan Center in Nelson, British Columbia, advises the beginner to "buy a book, such as T. T Liang's *Tai Chi and Self-Defense* and read the guiding points to help direct your tai chi chuan school search."

Ken Cohen sums up succinctly: "In looking for a good school, follow this rule: Do not believe your ears — what people say about this school or that school or what one instructor says about himself or others. As Emerson said, what you *are* speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say. Trust your own intuitive sense. How do you feel when you observe a class?"

Ask yourself if you feel enthused, playful, and inspired, or do you sense anger, stress, and fear? Look at many different schools and find one with which you feel comfortable. Look to the students of the class. Have any of them come close to the level of the teacher? Is there an atmosphere of learning and mutual respect? Does the instructor use his or her own words to express the principles, or merely quote some other authority?

Finally, observe the instructor in daily life. Is he speaking with controlled *chi* mind, living a tai chi life, or is the person "pushing the river"? To me, the real mark of mastery is ease and effortlessness, with precision in movement and a realization of one's own limitations and willingness to continue learning.