

## Master Benjamín Lo Teachings



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These teaching points have been compiled through decades of personal experience of Master Lo's teachings. They are not published per se in any other book or publication, either in Chinese or English to my knowledge, though any article or interview with Master Lo would naturally reflect similar content.

### 1. The Power of Zero

Ben told us, after demonstrating his usual total ease in moving, pushing, or throwing a much larger, stronger, and more physically more impressive opponent:

“Normally we think that if he has 100 pounds of force or power, I better have 150. But then if I get 150 pounds of force, he may have accumulated more himself. Or there'll be somebody else with more. So next time it will be my 150 against his 200. Then I'll need to go to 250... and still, there's always going to be somebody with more than me. It's an arms race in that direction. So I need to reverse my approach. I need to take my own power down to 0. Then there's no chasing or spiraling. Nothing can change. If he has 100, I have 0. If he has 150, I have 0. If he has 200, I still have 0, on and on, whatever he has, I'm always beneath it, it doesn't change or affect me. I'm not chasing his attributes, or competing, or catching up, or exceeding him. That's Taijiquan.”

I'm not saying this idea and practice is easy for ordinary students, like ourselves, to grasp. But it is food for thought from the master, who could always demonstrate it on anybody - no matter how large or how tough or how experienced a fighter.

### 2. Finding your own Beautiful Lady's Hand (美人手)

This is the procedure Ben sometimes teaches to help us find 美人手 correct position:

Stand close to a wall. Place your entire forearm up against the wall, with your palm facing the wall, and your fingertips together, pointing upwards, and extended naturally along the wall's surface. Don't force your arm against the wall, but conform to the flatness of the wall in a relaxed way. The base of your palm is very lightly touching the wall surface. Let your forearm and straight hand and fingers align and rest naturally, let them be slightly heavy against the wall. This is approximately the shape and feeling of Beautiful Lady's Hand (mei ren shou in Mandarin).

### 3. Which Taiji form posture is best for static holding practice?

People sometimes ask Ben whether one or another of the 37 postures of the Cheng form is especially good for "holding" practice (keeping the same position for many minutes to check your form and relaxation).

When I asked him this, he said: "No posture is 'best', all are good. Same thing as going to a party, you can always find at least one friendly person to talk to, and you can eventually find a practice posture that suits you very well."

#### **4. How can we practice Taiji in a very limited floor space?**

Ben told us two main ways to handle a space-limited practice condition:

a. If you have room to stand up at all, you can probably stand in one of the Taiji form postures. This is actually one of the main practice methods taught by Ben for general usage, not only space-limited. It is called 'zhan zhuang' in Chinese (see Teaching #3), and it can be extremely arduous - particularly if you really try to maintain the full 5 Principles at each moment ... as time passes. Obviously this method is available to you wherever you have room to stand up.

b. But once when I pressed Ben with this question about doing the entire continuous form in a limited area, he surprisingly showed me that the entire Cheng Taiji set can be performed in just four square feet of space! I can't describe each adjustment here, but actually it was very intuitive, just stepping back or moving in place where you would have gone forward. You can maintain all the 5 Principles and complete the entire 37-posture sequence in just four square feet of space.

So, no excuses for non-practice!

#### **5. What is the best way to work on basic fixed step push hands practice?**

When I first started with Ben, students would work mostly on fixed-step, double-hands tui-shou. It got extremely vigorous and, frankly, competitive at times. After I'd been there a few years, Ben came up with a new emphasis. More and more he emphasized an alternative practice format for fixed-step push hands, whereby one person would be the designated pusher and the other the designated yielder. The yielder should not actively push, but simply try to neutralize the incoming force of the designated pusher. Every 15 minutes or so, we'd switch roles. I think he felt that people were better able to control their inherent ego and aggression under this more controlled format. I certainly learned a lot from working in this way.

#### **6. Somebody said to Ben, "Why don't you correct me in class? I feel neglected."**

Ben said you should be glad when I don't correct you, it means others are worse than you and I need to spend the time with them. He also said that there's only so far corrections can go, depending on the student's level. For example, when a pot is on the stove in the correct place over the burner, then only time will do the job. There's no need to move the pot around on the burner much. Time and heat will do the rest of the job. But, if the pot is not on the burner, or on the stove at all, then of course it needs to be moved onto the burner, that is the function of corrections from a teacher. He also said that his ability to correct the student depends on the student's own progress in relaxation. To bend a bar in a desired shape, the bar must first be soft and pliable enough to work with.

#### **7. Somebody asked Ben, "How we can get to the point of using Taiji as a martial art?"**

Ben said that if you are working correctly, combative skill will evolve naturally. It's just like walking - if you set out in the correct direction, and keep walking, then no matter when, even if you didn't want to reach the destination that lies in that particular direction, you'll definitely get there no matter what. So don't worry about it, but keep trying to correct your practice.

#### **8. Pearl Necklace teaching:**

Ben said that the postures are like individual pearls on a pearl necklace. Each one is beautiful and valuable. But if any one pearl on a long necklace gets lost, dropped or broken, the necklace itself isn't much affected. That is analogous to having some small error or inability in a given posture. If however the string of the necklace is cut or broken, then the entire thing falls apart, the necklace is effectively gone or cannot be used for anything. The string is thus analogous to the 5 Principles.

### **9. Beginner's Mind:**

Everybody knows about beginner's mind from Zen (Suzuki Roshi). But Ben has also said similar things about tai ji practice. He said that each time you do the form, you should be careful and attentive to keep the principles accurately in mind, cautious about making a mistake just like a beginner. Beware of the careless arrogant "expert" practice mind.

### **10. An example of the Multiplicity of Error:**

Just as an example of the kinds of errors people fall into, Ben mentioned that in one principle (just a single example) "Body Upright", there are 10 major variations and only one is correct. You might lean forward, backward, to the left or right. You might lean on any of the intervening 4 diagonals. So far, 8 errors. Or, you might be upright - but with your body tense. Only the final variation - upright with relaxed body - is correct.

### **11. 1-Hand vs. 2-Hand Push Practice - Which is harder? :**

Most students instinctively seem to believe that double handed push hands (tui shou) practice has just got to be more difficult and "more advanced". But Ben has got us to think more deeply about this with the following rhetorical question: If you went to a Chinese restaurant and they handed you a single chopstick to eat with... ? He said "Yes you could maybe poke a few things, but that's about it. Eating would be really tough." Amusing and true of push hands also - single is far more difficult and more "advanced" (until ultimately everything all merges into total understanding a la Professor Cheng.)

### **12. Twin Siblings:**

Ben often distinguishes three common states: Tense, Relaxed, and Collapsed. Only Relaxed is useful in taiji practice, the others are extremes to be avoided. But Ben has said that the states of "relaxed" and "collapses" can easily be confused by an outside observer, as they tend to appear visually similar. They are, in Ben's words, "identical twins" in appearance. Thus they can only be distinguished by touch.

### **13. Distinguishing yin/yang changes in push hands (推手) practice:**

Ben has used the following teaching scenario to students to focus on the necessary sensitivity to yin/yang energy and tension changes in a push hands partner: If I told you to go down a flight of 10 stairs in the dark, but I also told you that some steps in the staircase are missing, would you just rush and clunk your way mindlessly down? No you would go lightly and sensitively, like a cat. Because you would know that you need to continually distinguish empty from full. That's the mind you need to be good at push hands.

### **14. Soul on Ice?**

Once a famous professor of dance and choreography visited Ben's Tai-Chi seminar, in Europe. She had developed a perfect system for written choreographic notation that could capture all movements and even subtle nuances of any physical expressive dynamics of the human body. She brought several of her students along to the seminar, and this Professor and her group sat on the sidelines and transcribed the entire Cheng Tai Chi sequence as Ben and the students worked through it on the floor. Afterwards she explained her project to Ben, saying that any of her students, even those who had never learned Tai Chi, could now replicate any portion of the form with perfect precision, just from the notations they had written. Ben asked to see, and indeed, it was true! The students could just "read off" the correct body motions

from the transcriptions and they performed the postures perfectly. Ben then called over a large hulking student and told him to stand solid. With a light touch Ben uprooted him and sent him flying across the training floor. Then Ben turned to the dance teacher and said "That is Tai Chi. Where in your notation is that written?" The teacher realized that this inner soul of the art was impossible to capture, freeze, or explain in any artificial, technical system.

### **15. Money Manager:**

Ben said that the main difference between an advanced Tai Chi person and a lesser player is not the "amount" of power they have, but only that it is used and deployed correctly or incorrectly. For example, say you want to buy a pair of sunglasses for \$1.50, and you have four pockets in your jacket, with one dollar in each pocket. Each time you reach into a pocket, you find \$1, but you put it back in the pocket, as \$1 isn't sufficient funds. Then imagine that after going through all your pockets in this way, you give up and conclude that you cannot afford the item. But then, somebody else comes along, who has \$4 too - all in a single pocket. He buys the item easily and there's an end to it. Most of us are like the four pocket would-be buyer.

### **16. Mirror Mirror:**

Somebody asked Ben: Wouldn't it be good to practice the (Cheng Man Ching 37-posture short) form symmetrically, so that we do it the 'normal' way, and then learn a mirror image version, with right and left reversed, for completeness or balance or something like that? Then, for example, there would be a version of Single Whip with the left hand hooked and the right hand striking forward, and so on. Ben said that first of all, the form in its current state, as created and taught by Professor Cheng, already has plentiful examples of symmetrical left/right balanced postures, including Brush Knee, Fair Lady Works Shuttle, Golden Cock on One Leg, Repulse Monkey, Cloud Hands, and so on and on. So not much more of this is really needed. Additionally, a deeper point – many amazing "natural" things are NOT symmetrical or balanced in the way that superficial observers would expect or desire. For example, the human brain has left/right hemispheric specialization, it is not functionally symmetric. And there are plenty of other examples. The Founder of Tai Chi was brilliant enough to create this art, do you think he didn't know about symmetry? If he was smart enough to create Tai Chi, it would be incredible if he missed this obvious point and now the truth is only realized when YOU come along and suggest it! The form exists in its current state for a reason. So let's try to master the great art as we have it from the Founder.

### **17. Qi Gong**

Somebody asked Ben, what is the difference between Tai Chi and Qi Gong? Should I study Qi Gong as a substitute or a supplement to Tai Chi? Ben said: "Tai Chi includes Qi Gong. But Qi Gong does not include Tai Chi."

Simple yet profound. Think about it!

### **18. Virtual Teacher**

Sometime when I'm practicing, I find it useful to imagine Ben is standing right next to me in "corrective" mode, as he has so many hundreds or even thousands of times. I inventory myself, what would he correct? First... he'd probably tell me to sit lower - front knee over toe! Then he usually check for body upright, perhaps I sometimes have a slight lean? Then ... relaxed? Abdomen, everywhere? Shoulders in a line (not one higher than the other? Waist facing square to a wall (or perfectly to a corner in the diagonal postures) ? Each of us has our own unique inventory of faults, but the corrections are all uniform, they derive entirely from the 5 Practice Principles. I do find this helpful to focus myself.

### **19. Taiji Humor (?)**

Ben teaches us entirely in accordance with his 5 Practice Principles. But we exhibit all kinds of weird variations. Ben often laughs gently at the strange distortions we come up with. Ben sometimes says "I

tell you wrist straight or waist straight or body upright, and you all bend yourselves this way or twist and wrench yourselves some other way ... I didn't tell you to do those things, why do you do them? Sometime I will tell you 'Make sure you bend your wrist like this' (makes a wild and weird shape), then you'll all suddenly do it perfectly straight!"

## **20. Are Yogi's (and Yogini's) Relaxed?**

Ben told us about an American student of Prof. Cheng in New York. When Ben first came to USA, he visited the NYC school and everyone told him about a woman who was considered un-pushable by anyone (other than Prof), due to her extreme contortionistic flexibility. When pushed to no matter what degree, she could bend her body straight back until her head could touch the floor behind her heels, without moving her feet at all. Ben told them that this woman is indeed soft, but still not relaxed. So saying, he demonstrated the difference between "flexibility" vs "relaxation" by easily popping her backwards multiple times with just a light touch. The other students were surprised and said "But she's so relaxed, how are you able to do that?" Ben said no, the softness that she's mastered is not the same thing as Tai Chi relaxation.

## **21. Prof. Zheng's Writings**

Ben helped the Professor by re-writing his artistically scrawled "grass style" Chinese manuscripts into standard block style characters, suitable for submission to the printer. While doing so he commented on the Professor's writing style, asking Prof "You use such a high literary style, it's really almost impossible to understand, would it be possible to write more in the colloquial plain language?" The Professor was amazed and replied "If somebody has trouble with the writing level of my works, can they even be considered Chinese?"

## **22. At Ease**

Ben said that when we sit in a plain chair, all of our backs and pretty much properly aligned, correctly shaped, and relaxed. But when we stand up, we all lose that completely and tense up our backs.

## **23. You're Too Strong!**

Sometimes when playing push hands, one student (after getting bumped back) will tell the other: No, that's no good you're TOO STRONG! Ben doesn't really like to hear students talking to each other that way. He asked us "How do you know he's too strong? It's only due to your own excess strength. If you jam a finger straight down onto a tabletop, you'll hurt it. But that's due to your own excessive strength, not the table per se. If you very softly and gently push your straight finger down onto that same surface, your finger will bend and you won't be hurt at all.

## **24. Self-Check**

There are so many self-styled experts on Tai Chi these days. Ben told us that one of the main values in knowing the Tai Chi Classic writings thoroughly is so that, no matter what you hear anybody say about Tai Chi or what wild theories are out there, if anything you hear from any other source contradicts the Classics, you know that's just nonsense.

## **25. Break It Down**

Ben has been asked "The Classics say that movement must be unbroken and continuous. Does the static "holding" type of posture practice contradict that somehow?" Answer: No, *zhan zhuang* is a different type of concentrated practice. The statement about unbroken movement is correct but applies to your performance of the connected set, and is not relevant to discussion of *zhan zhuang*.

## **26. High Roller**

Ben was asked by an adept of another popular Tai Chi style: Should we practice *fa jing* (emitting energy)? He replied, if you ask me should you *spend* money, the first thing I'll ask you back is, do you *have* any money?