

The Magic Tortoise Taijiquan School

Advancement Program



PURPOSE: to encourage students to make steady progress in their practice of Taijiquan; to define a path of knowledge and experience which we believe will lead to competence; and to recognize personal achievement on that path.

I. The Informal Option The Magic Tortoise advancement program presents a choice between two options. The informal option allows students to forgo public recognition of their progress. Those who choose this option will of course receive full support and guidance in their studies, and all the opportunities the school has to offer, including -- if they wish -- periodic evaluations (see below).

II. The Color System

"As long as you think you're green, you'll grow. If ever you think you're ripe, you'll rot."

The formal option in the Magic Tortoise advancement program is known as the "color system." The colors, worn as sashes around the waist, represent increasing commitment and observable improvement in the practice of Taijiquan. The five steps in the system correspond to "the five phases of change," or wuxing, in a sequence that symbolizes the process of creative transformation. The colors and their elements are: green (wood), red (fire), yellow (earth), silver (metal), and blue/black (water), represented in this system by purple.

Individuals will develop the skills and knowledge required to progress through the colors at their own pace. When a teacher feels a student is ready, the teacher will invite the student to request an "evaluation" for the next color. However, students may ask to be considered for the next color at any time.

Evaluations are not private lessons, and may be quite short. At the start of the session, the student presents the teacher with a red envelope containing money (\$5 is suggested), and any other symbolic gift, such as a stick of incense, tea, a beer, a piece of fruit, wild flowers, or an interesting stone. At the end of the session, the teacher will give the student a written evaluation and suggestions for further study. If the teacher endorses the student's advancement to the next color, the teacher will also give the student a signed card. The evaluation is not a rubber stamp: expect honesty and welcome correction.

To complete the process of advancement, the student sends the signed card or cards (all three teachers must endorse advancements to silver and purple) along with an advancement fee to the director of the school. The fee -- \$15 for green, \$20 for red and yellow, \$25 for silver and purple -- covers sash, certificate (red through purple), and record-keeping. Once they enter the color system, students are expected to wear their color during each class, lesson, workshop, or

school event.

With diligent effort, some students may achieve purple in four to five years. The colors are markers along a path of personal growth in the art, but they measure only the first few steps. While an accomplishment to be proud of, purple does not signify that one has completed study -- only that one has made a good start.

FIRST COLOR: GREEN (Wood--Determination) To enter the color system, a student must know the origin of the name of the school and must be familiar with the school's guidelines for etiquette (see the handout entitled "Magic Tortoise Students..."). They must know the meaning and pronunciation of "Taijiquan," "qi," "qigong," and "dantian," and if applicable, must be able to name and describe the style of Taijiquan they are studying (see "Notes" for green terms).

Any teacher or instructor-in-training may verify that the above requirements have been met: a formal evaluation is not necessary for green. The student may then wear the green (wood) sash, which represents their resolution to continue personal growth through Taijiquan.

SECOND COLOR: RED (Fire -- Form) When the student is able to perform an entire long form on their own to the satisfaction of their primary teacher, they are eligible to wear the red (fire) sash. This color represents their ability to perform "choreography," though their mastery of principles may be rudimentary. To obtain their teacher's endorsement, the student will schedule an evaluation (see above).

The student must be familiar with the history of the style they are studying, the names of the postures, and the Chinese names for the main stances (bu) in their form. They must know the pronunciation and meaning of: Dao (Tao), wuji, yin, yang; wushu, gongfu; peng, lu, ji, an (see "Notes" for red terms).

THIRD COLOR: YELLOW (Earth -- Principles) A student is eligible to wear the yellow (earth) sash when they are able to demonstrate significant improvement in their embodiment of principles of unified movement: dependent movement of the arms, utilization of the waist, matching, head position, alignment, mobility of the hips and stability of the knees. The following is adapted from a description of standards given to tournament judges:

Posture (xing: shape, configuration) is the key to correctness of form. Entirety (unity, matching) is the key to movement. Vigor (power) is the key to overall technical skill.

- + Posture is the main factor which determines whether the player's forms are correct. The body should be relaxed, the movements easy but not soft, stretched but not stiff. The head should be lifted, the pelvis settled; the feet strongly placed, the knees stable; the arms rounded, the shoulders lowered.

- + Entirety is the key to coordination. The waist must act like an axle, all body parts should correlate, arms and legs match.

- + The impression of vigor reveals the player's overall technical level. Any action, should display lightness, agility, steadiness, calmness, and a combination of solidity and emptiness. Movements should be smooth and continuous.

The student will have taken one or more private lessons with their primary teacher in addition to classes and will have made significant personal progress, measured against the level of performance they exhibited to earn red. To obtain their teacher's endorsement, the student will schedule an evaluation (see above).

The student will be thoroughly familiar with the first Taijiquan Classic attributed to Zhang Sanfeng, the thirteen torso methods, the three external correspondences (wai san he), and the "rules for the human stage" (see Jou). They must know the meaning and pronunciation of: bagua (eight symbols) and bamen (eight gates); wuxing (five elements or five phases of change) and wubu (five steps or attitudes); shifu, laoshi (both mean teacher; but there are two forms of shifu, depending on the character used for "fu": one means skilled worker/expert, the other is a polite form of address to a revered person, e.g. master, or father/mother as to a monk or nun); and a few common conversational expressions, such as: "ni [and the more formal, nin] hao ma?" (how are you?) "wo hen hao, ni ne?" (I'm fine, and you?) "wo yie hao, xiexie nin" (I'm also fine, thank you); zaijian (good-bye).

FOURTH COLOR: SILVER (Metal -- Intention) To be eligible to wear the silver (metal) sash, the student must have made progress in embodiment of the full range of principles described above and in the Taijiquan Classics. Specifically, they must demonstrate "intention" in their solo form. At this stage, all three teachers in the school must be satisfied that the student has advanced.

The student will have begun interactive work through tui shou (push-hands), san shou (free sparring: in this school, we practice a traditional 2-person san shou set), and/or other application practice (see Note below), and must have studied with at least two teachers in the school. The student will participate in the solo form division of a tournament and collect comments from each judge.

The student will be thoroughly familiar with the second Taijiquan Classic attributed to Wang Zongyue, know the three internal correspondences (nei san he) and the "rules for the earth stage." They must know the meaning and pronunciation of: cai, lie, zhou, kao (the four corners); song (relax), san cai (the three powers); ting, zou, nian, hua, na (five interactive energies); chan si jing (reeling silk energy); heng, ha (reverse breathing sounds); guanxi.

FIFTH COLOR: PURPLE (Water -- Extension) A student is eligible to wear the purple (water) sash or ribbon when they can demonstrate "extension," fa jing, through awareness and energy in form and knowledge of applications. As with silver, purple must be conferred by all three teachers. The student will demonstrate a weapon satisfactorily (see Note below), and will participate in the push-hands division of a tournament and collect comments from each judge/referee.

The student will be thoroughly familiar with the third Taijiquan Classic by Wu Yuxiang, and will know "four important concepts" (Jou pp. 158-9) and the "rules for the sky stage." They must know the meaning and pronunciation of: fa; jing, yi, li, shen; kai, he; zhan zhuang; baihui, mingmen, huiyin, laogong, yongquan. The student will complete a special project leading to a public demonstration of their ability to integrate and extend what they have learned.

[Note: with the instructor's permission, students may begin interactive and/or weapon studies any time; they need not wait until the attainment of a particular color.]

NOTES

Magic Tortoise. The name of this school comes from "Providing Nourishment," energy pattern #27 in the Yi Jing (I Ching, the Book of Changes). The Wilhelm-Baynes edition says: "The magic tortoise is a creature possessed of such supernatural powers that it lives on air and needs no earthly nourishment."

The tortoise was believed to have been present at the creation of the world, and to support the pillars of the universe on its back. It is a symbol of longevity and the keeper of esoteric knowledge, encoded in the markings on its shell. The tortoise is emblematic of the soul -- its pace like the slow but steady evolution of our inmost nature. The tortoise's ability to open and close, to stretch and contract, is a natural image of one of Taijiquan's key principles. The Yi Jing speaks specifically about nourishing and cultivating character through movement and tranquillity. This is the purpose of the Magic Tortoise School.

Romanization of Chinese Characters. There have been various systematic attempts to transcribe Chinese speech into alphabetic form since the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci's transcription in the early seventeenth century. The two systems in most common use today are the Wade-Giles, devised by two British linguists in the 19th century, and the pinyin--the system of spelling devised by the Chinese themselves beginning in 1958. In Wade-Giles, for example, is "T'ai-Chi Ch'üan;" while in pinyin, it is "Taijiquan." They are both pronounced the same way, and refer to the same thing. The Magic Tortoise School tends to use pinyin, but students would do well to be familiar with the representational conventions of both systems.

Pronunciation. The purpose of learning certain Chinese terms in this advancement program is to foster an appreciation of the culture that gave birth to Taijiquan, and to savor some of the concepts related to the art in their native linguistic setting. To speak standard Mandarin well, words must not only be properly pronounced, but must also be spoken with the correct tone (see Tones). Nevertheless, while tones are marked in this document, the requirements of the advancement program will be satisfied if students merely manage an approximate pronunciation.

GLOSSARY

Bu. Step or stance. Gong (or gong jian) bu -- bow (or bow and arrow) stance; ma bu -- horse stance; xu bu -- void or empty stance; xie bu -- rest step; pu (or pu tui) bu -- extended leg stance; gen bu -- follow step; dingzi bu -- "T" step; duli bu -- single leg stance; tui bu -- backward step; mo chuang bu -- rolled step.

Dantian (tan t'ien in Wade-Giles). An energy center in the human body; the center in the lower abdomen that is the point of organization and collection for physical life force, qi. Also used for the major energy centers between the eyes and at the heart area as well as the abdomen: "upper, middle, and lower dantian."

Dao (Tao in Wade-Giles). Sometimes translated as "Way" or "Word" ("In the beginning was the

Word..."), the Dao is beyond description. "Since before time and space were, the Tao is. It is beyond is and is not. How do I know this is true? I look inside myself and see." (Mitchell, Tao Te Ching, v. 21). We might say that there is everything (Taiji) and nothing (Wuji) -- and the Dao is that which causes them both to be. For practical purposes, it is "the way things are."

Gongfu (kung fu in Wade-Giles). A high level of achievement or skill, clearly the result of long, hard work. Sometimes used as a synonym for wushu, martial arts, especially in reference to traditional, external styles of Chinese martial arts.

Neijia. "Inner school." (Neigong , internal work, is a related term) an art that emphasizes breath, energy, and mental focus to benefit the internal organs; compare waijia : external exercise to benefit muscles and bones.

Peng, Lu, Ji, An. The first four of the eight gates (bamen), corresponding to the four cardinal directions: south, north, west, and east. Commonly translated "ward-off," "rollback," "press," and "push," they are more accurately thought of as energies rather than as specific postures.

Qi (ch'i in Wade-Giles). Life energy or vital force, possessed by all things: the manifested essence of the unique inner vibration of a being that gives it its characteristic nature and life. Sometimes also called "bioenergy," "bioelectricity," or intrinsic substance.

Qigong (ch'i kung in Wade-Giles). Literally, "energy" (qi , see above) "work" (gong , see gongfu above). Systematic approaches to the cultivation and use of qi.

Taijiquan (T'ai-Chi Ch'üan in Wade-Giles). Pronounced "tai jee chuwhen." "Taiji" is a noun, referring to the extremes of yin and yang (see below), but Taijiquan is often mistakenly translated "supreme ultimate boxing," as if tai and ji were separate adjectives. Taijiquan is more correctly translated "great extremes boxing," or "art of the fist that embodies the dynamics of yin and yang." A classical Chinese definition of Taijiquan would be "eight trigrams in the arms, five elements in the feet: hands stir the stars, feet turn the earth."

Wudang. From Wudang Shan , a mountain range sacred to Taoists south of the Han River in northwest Hupei. It is the site of the monastery where Zhang Sanfeng reputedly received the inspiration to create Taijiquan. The term Wudang is often associated with internal arts, as Shaolin , a Buddhist monastery, is associated with external arts.

Wuji. Ultimate nothingness; void. Also, the state from which Taiji emerges, and therefore theoretically the posture before the beginning and after the conclusion of all Taijiquan forms.

Wushu. Chinese term for "martial arts." While it has become associated with modern efforts to promote the arts as performance sports, the term is still generic.

Yin & Yang. Names given to the complementary forces that together comprise Taiji: the "great extremes." In The Dao of Taijiquan, section 2-1, Master Jou says "although they are opposite in nature, there is an harmonious relationship between them... the characteristics of Yang are heat, motion, and outward centrifugal force; whereas cold, stillness, and inward centripetal force are the characteristics of Yin."

PRIMARY REFERENCE

Jou, Tsung Hwa. The Dao of Taijiquan: Way to Rejuvenation. Tai Chi Foundation.

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