

Feelings and Insights on Martial Art Learning

Chinese martial art has a long history and is a discipline of immense width and depth. During the several thousand years of history, there are countless heroes and respectable leaders who devoted their entire life to martial art learning. However, as a result of misunderstanding, misconception, lack of endurance or failure to master proficiency, only a small number of people can be successful.

Since my childhood, I have been learning martial arts from my uncle for more than forty years. All along I have been pursuing martial arts seriously, and was taught and instructed by more than ten senior martial art masters. At the age of 26, I founded my own martial art institute at Wen An County in Hebei Province which is the hometown of Master Dong Hai Chuan, the founder of Bagua Zhang. During this lengthy period of teaching, I always wonder: we all know that it requires hard work to learn martial arts. However, to what extent do I need to endure the hardship before I can become competent? In this modern generation, we do not resort to martial arts for retaliation on others' wrongdoings against us like killing our parents or hurting our wives. So where does the motivation for hard training come from? How can you ignite your passion so as to tolerate tremendous hardship and suffering during the practice? As a keen martial artist, is there any discipline of martial arts that will inspire you to madly indulge in it so that you are willing to commit to training with perseverance? These questions have always been at the back of my mind with no perfect answer. In the past I have always assumed that once I met a reputable master of a renowned martial art discipline and learned some kind of advanced martial art form, I would be able to achieve proficiency by conscientious learning and diligent practice. However, decades of experience tells me otherwise. In this world, there are numerous martial art disciplines and reputable masters. Those martial art disciplines that can remain in place until now have gone through repeated challenges. Each of them has its own vitality. The key is whether you are given the opportunity to grasp the true way to, and real meaning of, martial art. "The master leads you through the entrance but the result depends on yourself." What does it mean by going through the entrance? Are you a true disciple simply by seeking admittance and bowing to your teacher? Did you acquire true heritage by learning a few martial art forms or fighting skills? We have to overcome superstition, blind obedience and idolizing. We should only be regarded as having gained an entrance and obtained authentic heritage when we understand the essence of martial art learning. Then through what ways can we acquire authentic heritage? Is it through learning from masters of direct lineage or through self-learning (not being taught personally but follow the teachings of one whom we respectfully claim to be our teacher)? This depends on destiny. Some martial art friends asked me, "There are so many martial art instructors in this world. How can I find an ideal martial art teacher?" Having gone through many years of various experiences, I believe there are several important criteria that may be used for reference.

First we look at integrity. The teacher must be honest, practical, just and kind, and regard the teaching of martial art as his responsibility and goal. Only a teacher with such character is able to pursue the right course persistently, leading his students to a bright path while making improvements himself at the same time.

Secondly we look at capability. Some teachers always think highly of themselves as the keepers of authentic teachings, and intend to use the reputation of his ancestors to achieve personal fame and gain. We need to know that real martial art capability comes from continuous practice and learning, and not from reciting notes or telling stories. Moreover, we must not quote or use the classic writings of respected ancestors, unless you have thoroughly obtained such degree of competence. Otherwise, it is just a usurpation of in-depth essence coupled with shallow body language. It is indeed very difficult to interpret classic writings with our body. We can judge whether a teacher practises what he teaches by examining his actual illustration and demonstration.

Finally we look at instruction quality. Many capable teachers fail to lead their students into the grand hall of martial arts because they do not know how to teach according to the different aptitude of the students. Although we say "the master leads you through the entrance but the result depends on yourself", the teacher must first direct the students to the right track. The teacher must be flexible in his coaching so that the students have confidence in his ability and are willing to follow him on a long term basis and practise painstakingly. When students find that the teacher's character and ability are not satisfactory and feel no prospects, thereby leaving to look for other teachers, it is futile to accuse these students of ingratitude and betrayal. The teacher should reflect upon himself and rectify his own shortcomings. By examining the students' extent of improvement and level of achievement, you can determine whether a particular teacher possesses the instruction quality that you expect. The biggest mistake of some martial art practitioners is the failure to appreciate the merits of others, and always consider that his own ideas and skills are the best and most perfect. They never accept diverging opinions raised by others, and stubbornly believe that, from whatever aspects, foreign martial arts are inferior to Chinese martial arts, and other disciplines of martial arts are not as good as their own. These concepts are reflections of narrow-mindedness and misunderstanding of true martial arts.

As to the issue of "authentic heritage", it really depends on the perspective one adopts. I am deeply grateful to all the teachers and fellow disciples who taught and coached me in the past. Without their instructions and rectifications, I would not have gained today's insight. As a result of a personal experience, I am able to break through the restrictions imposed by traditional notions such as heritage, fighting styles and disciplines, and begin to appreciate martial arts from a new angle. After a period of study and practice, I finally resolve the many queries that I have about the learning and practising of martial arts. At the same time, I finally come across a superb form of martial art that makes me delirious in terms of practising and teaching martial art, namely "Yi Quan" or "Dacheng Quan" founded by Mr. Wang Xiang Zhai, a grand martial art master in recent history. Also, I am fortunate enough to accept Buddhist meditation. Through my encounter with Master Jin Bodhi, I have renewed my understanding of martial arts and life. This destiny is the result of my long term persistence. I cannot help but exclaim, "The world is fair to those who are conscientious."

Someone said to me, "Master Gao, you teach us martial arts without holding back. We are so lucky to have met you!" I do so because, just like you, I have also tried to find a teacher of integrity and ability to guide me in my training on a long term basis. In the past when I met someone of seniority who possessed certain martial art skills, I would beg him to teach me at all costs. To show my sincerity I spent a lot of time and energy and all the money I could afford. I understand the difficulties faced by

students, and so I now cherish the encounter I have with my students and share with them what I consider to be mastery skills. What I do now and shall continue to do in the future is to become the teacher that I desire. In my view, "admiring martial art is not the same as learning martial art; learning martial art is not the same as practising martial art; and practising martial art is not the same as knowing martial art". We should not regard our illusions as true feelings, regard our feelings as actual martial art skills, or regard our martial art skills as omniscient power. We can only truly understand and attain achievement in martial arts when we practise steadfastly what we know.

This book includes more than ten Yi Quan stances that I have taught and practised, and is intended to be a useful reference for beginners. I hope those of you who want to pursue health and happiness and those who want to excel in martial arts can maintain daily practice and, step by step, improve your stances steadily. While these stances may seem simple and boring, be aware of the changes and impacts they bring to various parts of your body. Don't be someone who only talks a lot but takes no action. Trying to possess good health, longevity or superb martial arts without long term training and diligent practices is just like building a castle in the air. I have also included in this book, and would like to share with fellow keen martial art practitioners, several practice rhymes written by Master Wang Xiang Zhai. The simplest way is always the best way. The truth lies in plain and honest devotion to daily practice.

May we mutually encourage one another!

Gao Yuan

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