

This is a read-only draft of a chapter in a forthcoming book: *Lao Tzu's Court: Exploring Taoist Practices in a Western Culture*. Please do not save or make copies. The finalized version will be available at [SimplyTao.com](http://SimplyTao.com). Thank you!

## 6: Finding a Teacher

At some point along the getting started path, a need for a teacher arises. For some this is the first step, for others it may occur later. Regardless of the timing, it is a natural aspect of learning about Taoism. Some people strongly insist you **MUST** have a teacher with associated fairly strict ideas about what that means. Others believe the necessity of a teacher grows from the nature of the material, requiring personal guidance, interpretation and support, which explains the long-standing oral tradition of teaching. There are many aspects of finding a teacher to consider.

### Types of Teachers

In Western culture we tend to think of teachers as experts, usually associated with some formal school structure, with various degrees of certification or competency. This is only one type of teacher.

There is a common story in Chinese medicine that, historically, physicians were considered of three levels. The basic level physician treated people who were very sick. The intermediate level physician treated people who were only mildly ill so they didn't become very sick. The advanced level physician treated people who were not ill at all, so they wouldn't become sick.

We can draw an analogy to Taoist teachers. Although there are probably more, let's start with three levels to keep it simple. The first level teacher explains the steps of a technique or practice. For example, here are the steps to bring breath and chi to the tan tien (center, naval, core). Everybody learns the same steps and does the same technique.

A second level teacher knows how to adapt a technique to a specific person or even which technique is most needed by each person. In a tan tien breathing class, this teacher might show one person how to breathe through the feet first on the way to directing it to the tan tien. This same teacher might instruct another person to direct the breath through the heart first. At this teaching level instruction is personalized, recognizing that different students need slightly different guidance.

A third level teacher might instruct by simply bringing attention to the process of breathing. Rather than giving everybody a technique or adapting the technique to each individual, this teacher may simply point to the breathing process, point to the tan tien and allow the natural way of breathing with the tan tien to unfold.

This teacher creates a supportive context, a place where students learn the process by following the natural way of breathing. In some ways, this level of teacher instructs by being the lesson. Students learn tan tien breathing by being with the teacher, observing and feeling their own internal breathing process.

A fourth level of teaching may be the ability to switch between levels. A different way to distinguish teachers might be: one teaches about the body, another the mind, another the spirit. We could go on and on. These different levels of teaching are not mutually exclusive. There is no set sequence of moving from one to another. Some teachers may incorporate different levels of teaching into the same class.

The point is not to label teachers in a certain way, but to help us recognize that there are different methods of teaching Taoist practices. There may be times when we have access to only one style of teacher. There may also be phases when technique training is the primary focus. There may be other times when the focus on learning technique is much less important. With awareness of these different levels, we can bring our attention to the learning process and understand when a particular style of teaching might be most useful. In this way we begin to follow a natural process of learning.

A good example of different styles of teaching is provided by B. K. Frantzis, an American who studied with several different teachers in Asia. In *Relaxing into Your Being*, Frantzis writes about one of his primary Taoist teachers, Liu Hung Chieh of Beijing. Liu apparently taught only two disciples in over 50 years, but he taught each of them quite differently. Liu taught Frantzis the water method, a more yin, relaxed and dissolving approach. He taught his other disciple, Bai Hua, the fire method, a more yang, active and creating approach. Liu recognized that each student needed a different approach, but that they both would develop a similar depth to their practice.

No matter their level, expertise or how they teach, truly great teachers create a context that students can utilize to gain their own experience.

Early in my training, a martial arts teacher simply and elegantly demonstrated the essence of being a great teacher. His teaching philosophy was: to teach you everything I know and then offer a boost up to the next level. The sincerity and genuineness of his intent still inspires and resonates after more than two decades.

In explaining how to teach others another inspirational chi kung teacher said,

teach each person how to become their own master! This type of teaching goes far beyond technique instruction.

It's important to remember that there is no need to apply a judgment of good or bad, better or worse to any of these levels of teaching. Most people teach in various ways. There is also no particular type of teacher with which to always begin. It's helpful to recognize that there are quite a variety of types of teachers as we start to meet them.

### Finding a First Teacher

When people ask for referrals to teachers, I try to offer several options with this advice, go meet them. Observe a class, notice how they teach, listen and respond to questions. Ask yourself, is this person someone I can learn from? Then listen for the internal response.

Another way to find a teacher is to consider both the subject and how you learn. Some people are movement oriented, kinesthetic learners, and gravitate toward these teachers and subjects, such as tai chi, yoga, martial arts, or dance. Others might be more naturally drawn to quiet sitting with little verbal instruction. Some people are very visually oriented and want books to read and videos to follow. There is no one correct way, but there may be a way that is more appropriate for each of us, at different stages or phases of our learning process.

A more practical concern may be location. In a large metropolitan area, like San Francisco, there may be a choice between hundreds of potential teachers. In a smaller city, there may be one teacher. Even if that one teacher's class may not seem like a perfect fit because of subject, teaching style or personality, it might be a useful starting place.

If there are no teachers close by, there are travel options. Many teachers offer weekend workshops, which might occur in a larger, nearby city. If there is enough local interest, you might organize a class where a teacher travels to you.

There are also many options with long distance travel. Some of my initial instruction was done by traveling cross-country to attend four to six weeks of summer retreat. I would then practice what I learned over the next year before returning again the following summer.

Access to teachers and learning Taoism in modern times is radically different than

in ancient China. Imagine, for a moment, what it would have been like to live in a small rural Chinese village in the fourth century. Most people probably never ventured more than 50 miles from their birthplace. Finding a teacher was more a function of who was available and learning whatever subject they taught. Classical stories tell of dedicated seekers who might walk several years to meet a teacher or visit a monastery they had only heard about.

Today, if we want, we can travel almost anywhere in the world to study with a teacher. We have access to thousands of books, videos, CDs, DVDs, and the Internet to learn about teachers, systems and schools.

The current method of offering classes and workshops is also a very new way of learning Taoist practices. Again, in ancient China, a potential student might apprentice with a teacher for years before learning the first practice. Now, students show up on Friday evening for a weekend workshop and expect to know everything about the subject by Sunday. The Western class and workshop format is not necessarily bad, but it is important to maintain perspective about what we are learning and how we go about the learning process.

### Expanding the Definition of Teacher

Our teachers don't always call themselves Taoists. If the intention is learning the natural way of things, anyone can become our teacher. They may not even know the term Tao, but we recognize in them a natural way of being. It might be how they garden, or parent, or paint or dance. It may be how they naturally just listen and accept us into their conversations and lives. Included in these informal teachers are people who share our Taoist interest, but may not be formal teachers. Sometimes we can learn the most or easiest from someone who has very recently learned a practice themselves and shares it, or the freshness of their experience, with us.

So far, we've explored finding teachers and noticed that they may come in many forms and are not necessarily limited to formal classrooms or schools. Teachers also don't have to be limited to being human.

Taoist stories describe students and sages living in the mountains and forests, learning about the Tao by observing nature: plants, trees, mountains, weather, rivers and stars. Many Taoist exercises are named after animals they emulate: deer, bear, snake, crane, monkey.

We, too, can take cues from nature around us. It is not necessary to become a mountain hermit to learn about the natural way from nature herself. Spending time in nature or bringing nature into our daily lives is the most natural of Taoist classrooms. The teacher's credentials are impeccable.

## Teachers are Human

Just because someone calls themselves a Taoist teacher does not guarantee that they are, or that they are the correct teacher for us. Most teachers, even with all their imperfections, are probably genuinely trying to help students by sharing what they know about Taoist practices. It is also true that there are some who will purposefully call themselves Taoist teachers (or Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, therapist, counselor, minister, healer, etc.) in order to take advantage of people. It is a sad, but true reflection of reality, not only now, but historically as well. While there is no specific way to recognize an unscrupulous teacher, trusting your own intuition provides important guidance.

In general, Taoist practices are meant to empower people. If you find yourself in a situation of giving away your power, feeling a decrease in self-esteem or self-respect, this may not be the right teacher for you.

A Chinese medicine teacher offered an invaluable lesson early in my training. He said that not everyone who walks through your door is your client. At the time it seemed rather simple and obvious advice. Over the years it has helped me deeply. The assumption, usually unspoken or unconscious, of having to treat everyone equally effectively, creates a large amount of pressure to perform that is totally unrealistic and unachievable. It grows from a technician approach, not only to healing, but everything: apply the same technique to every body, every thing with equal effectiveness. Doing healing work, recognition this is not my client to work with, the best treatment may be a list of referrals where they might better receive what they need.

This same approach may be applied to finding a Taoist teacher. Not every Taoist teacher is our teacher. This removes a lot of pressure and allows us more space to feel whether a specific teacher is appropriate or not, without judgment on them or us.

It is important to honor and respect our teachers, formal or informal. However, it is just as important to realize they are not perfect. No matter the years of experience and training, lineage, meditative skill or spiritual depth, we all are all

human. Each of us are prone to all positive and negative human attributes; in short, imperfect. Expecting any of our teachers to be perfect is an obstacle that will certainly show up at some time to impede the learning process. It is also easy for teachers to believe student expectations of perfection and create their own unrealistic and unhealthy attitudes.

Finding a good teacher is not the only requirement to undertaking a Taoist practice. Some people feel like finding the right teacher is all they need to do, as if the teacher will then do all the rest. Not true. We also need relationships with fellow students, study of classic texts, group practice, personal practice, time in nature and more. Our practice includes all of these aspects. A teacher helps and facilitates the process, but is not the only variable and at times, may not even be the most important variable.

If we can relax our Western approach to what a teacher means, we may find a natural way that teachers come into our lives. We might attend a weekly chi kung class, get together with a fellow student for tea and work with a neighbor in her garden. The first steps on a Taoist path may start with one or more teachers and naturally gravitate toward others as our interests expand or become more focused. We may initially explore movement with one teacher and later be drawn to silent sitting meditation with another teacher. When we conceptualize one and only one teacher, we may miss a natural flow of several teachers. If we focus too exclusively on studying with an expert teacher, we may overlook a very natural way in which we all learn from each other.

A need for teachers while exploring a Taoist path is a natural one. It is important to recognize any cultural or personal definitions of who or what a teacher of the Tao may be. This will allow us to see the teachers all around and choose from them wisely.