

# A Tai Chi Journey

## The Crazy Wisdom Interview with Richard Miller, Tai Chi and Bagua Teacher

By Dennis Chernin, MD, MPH  
Photography by Bill Fink and Linda Lawson

*I have instantly fallen in love only a few times in my life. The most wonderful of these occurred when I first met my wife, Jan, on the diag here in Ann Arbor in 1975 and after the birth of each of our four children, Abe, Nathaniel, Ethan, and Ariana.*

*Another moment of instantaneous delight occurred when I first observed people doing tai chi chuan (tai ji quan) in the early 70's in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. Being mesmerized by its slow, rhythmic, dance like motion and feeling quite emotional and captivated by its beauty, I soon realized I had to study this art form. And much to my delight, I soon learned that hidden within tai ji were both a powerful martial art and a meditation through movement.*

*Returning to Ann Arbor, my long study of tai ji (yang style) was initiated with a local, colorful, and soft-spoken Volvo mechanic, Bob Thorson, and his teacher, Phil Ho. In Madison, Wisconsin, while doing a residency in psychiatry and in Chicago while practicing holistic medicine, I continued to practice tai ji, although yoga and meditation became my primary focus.*

*We moved back to Ann Arbor in 1981 and from time to time Bob and I would get together to talk of old times and practice our tai ji form. In the late 90's, I had decided to study other forms of Chinese martial arts and had often heard that Richard Miller had great skill in many of these systems. Five years ago, I happened to meet Richard in Burns Park practicing with his group, was very impressed, and soon began studying tai ji and bagua with him.*

*In our class, we study chen style, the original and oldest form of tai ji, and baguazhang, another Chinese internal martial art. Bagua is a powerful fighting form and at the same time, like tai ji, meditative. We practice three days weekly, spending the first hour and a quarter on tai ji and the next two hours on bagua.*

*The chen tai ji and bagua we practice take concentrated effort, involve both slow and fast movements, and often are quite athletic. To quote from Richard's website, greatlakeswushu.com, "Chinese martial arts (wushu) is a rich and challenging discipline; the unification of body and mind is its supreme goal. Strength, health, and fighting skills are rewards and the cultivation of inner qualities such as steadfastness, humility, and will are the bedrock upon which the art is rooted."*

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*Since working with Richard and the group, my physical health has never been better and old back problems are much improved. Whether it's doing the slow meditative movements of tai ji, turning the circle in bagua, or wielding our 7 pound, 5 foot bagua saber, I always feel stimulated, challenged, and sometimes a bit sore.*

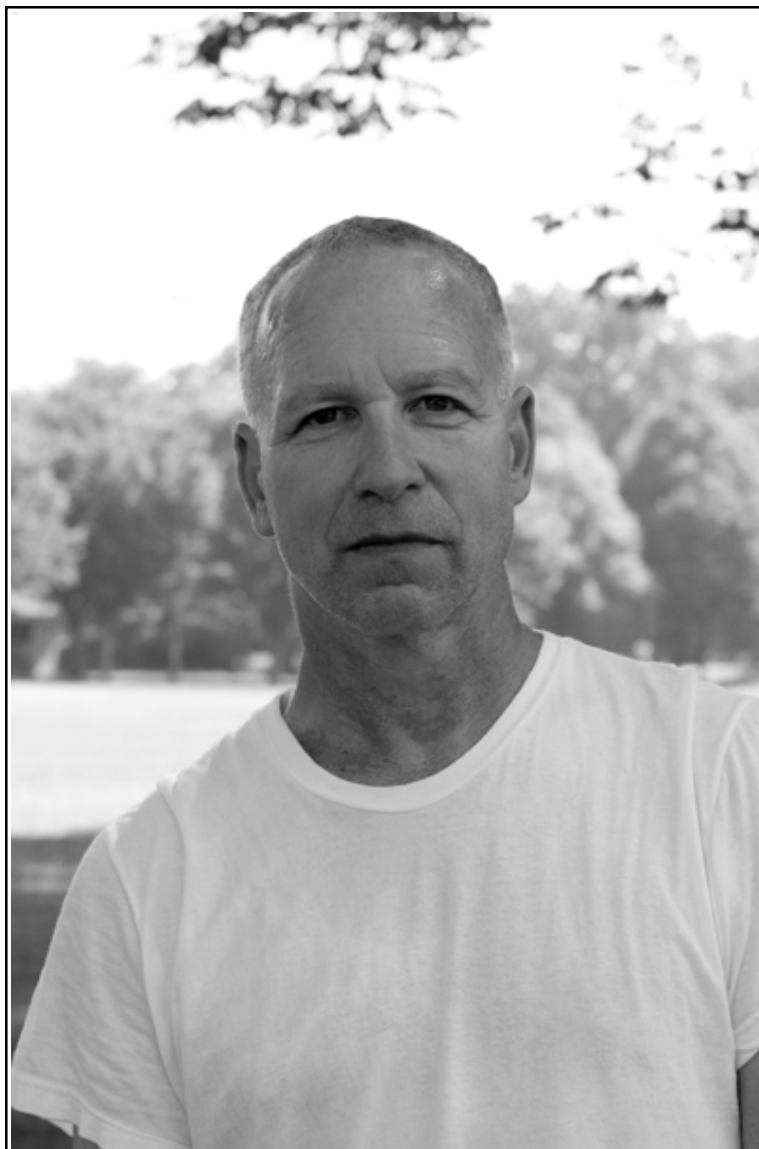


Photo by Linda Lawson

Richard Miller is the guiding teacher at Great Lakes Wushu.

*I have often encouraged friends and patients to join our group because of the therapeutic, social, and martial aspects of the group and because of my respect for Richard. Richard is a strong willed, quiet, and serious man with a good sense of humor. He is authentic, hard working, humble, and a patient teacher, giving freely to his students. His tai ji is beautiful to watch and his bagua is powerful and precise.*

*For me, what makes Richard unique and stand out as a teacher and practitioner is that he has dedicated his life to studying and perfecting these kung fu forms. His own training with his teachers has been, and continues to be, deep, intense, and thorough. He is a true professional, spending long hours mastering the intricacy of each movement and developing the tremendous circular and spiraling power inherent in these arts.*

*I want to thank Bill Zirinsky for giving me the opportunity to briefly share this tai ji/bagua journey with the Crazy Wisdom Community Journal readers and to Richard for his time, friendship, and his teaching.*

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**Dennis Chernin:** Thanks Richard for doing this interview. How long have you lived in Ann Arbor and where did you live before?

**Richard Miller:** I've lived here since 1992 and also from 1975-1978. I'm from Detroit originally. I lived in Taiwan in 1978-79 and in the San Francisco Bay area for 12 years (78-91).

*There are more photos of Richard Miller and his students on pages 24 and 25.*

**Dennis Chernin:** Could you tell us a bit more about yourself, your job and your family?

**Richard Miller:** I'm 56 years old and have a daughter living in Washington State. I have a four year old grand daughter and another grand child on the way. I live on the southeast side of Ann Arbor and during the day I'm an Ann Arbor School District bus driver. Besides teaching tai ji and bagua locally, I teach classes at EMU and UM Dearborn and also do some writing for various martial arts journals and publications.

**Dennis Chernin:** When did you start practicing internal martial arts?

**Richard Miller:** I started learning tai ji in Ann Arbor in '75 or '76. I saw someone doing it in the park and didn't even know what it was. Something about that slow, mesmeric movement caught my eye and seized my imagination. Then I got into a class at the "Y" in Ann Arbor.

**Dennis:** And how important is your practice to you now and over the years?

**Richard:** It's been a central interest of mine, a central facet of my adult life for many years now. In the most mundane sense, it's a very physical outlet. Getting a lot of intense exercise is good for my disposition.

**Dennis:** What is it about your disposition that you need an outlet for?

**Richard:** I think I tend to over-think things. I'm an analytical kind of person. For me to just be moving my body around and working a lot of nervousness out that way is healthy for me. It's mentally challenging. It's far from being a mindless way of exercising. It's a discipline that requires a great deal of mental application, reflection and focus.

We want to be relaxed in a way so that we're not interfering with our own movement. The mind should also be relaxed yet attentive and not distracted.

**Dennis:** How much time during the week do you spend practicing?

**Richard:** I practice at least 12 hours weekly in class and about 10 hours on my own. It's actually far less than I used to.

**Dennis:** Can you discuss the differences in the various internal martial arts, and can you explain the difference between internal martial arts, tai ji and bagua, and external martial arts like karate and tae kwon do?

**Richard:** That's kind of a nebulous realm. Looking at it in terms of levels, even so-called internal martial arts start out external. You have to learn the mechanics of moving your body. You have to gain an awareness of your body and be able to get it to obey you. I'm referring to that as external, even though it does require thinking and analysis. As you get deeper into the art it becomes subtler, and more refined. That's when the internal aspect is emphasized to a greater degree.



Photo by Bill Fink

Richard Miller in an impeccable tai chi stance (pu tui shi).

Dennis: Could you explain the difference between wu shu, kung fu and martial arts?

Richard: In China, the martial arts are called wu shu. That literally means martial arts or war arts. Kung fu is a term that's also used for the martial arts. But, literally it means skill developed over a long period of time, a refinement, a development over a period of time. But it can apply not only to martial arts. It can be applied to any kind of skill that's gained over time.

Dennis: Can you discuss your relationship with your main teachers?

Richard: I studied with Adam Hsu in San Francisco for 12 years. So you can say my world revolved around him to a large extent and I just tried to get his approval. I never felt like I was good enough. So it made me fight real hard and practice hard.

Dennis: What about your relationship with your bagua teacher, He Jinbao?

Richard: He's much more encouraging and more prone to say you're doing something well. It's a nice change. I think he's tremendously advanced in his art. And anyone who I know who's met He Jinbao is stunned by his power. There's not much more to say about it than that.

Dennis: How would you describe your self as a teacher and what qualities as a teacher are important to you?

You know, I've learned from students as they've talked to me that I've influenced them beyond the class. And that's something I haven't thought much about and I'm always surprised when I hear that. Various students have told me how important the class is to them and the benefits they've derived from practicing. Sometimes it seems to have had a steadying effect on their lives and they've had success in areas that were unexpected.

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I feel fortunate that the students we've had have consistently been nice people. I think when people enter the class they feel welcome and enjoy practicing with people who surround them.

Dennis: In class, I have found you very direct and, at times, you push me quite a bit to work harder. Is this an important aspect of how you teach?

Richard: I really hope students do their best in our class. I try to get the most out of each person, help them get the most out of their capabilities. If a student has physical problems or health concerns, we adjust the practices to accommodate his or her limitations. With serious students who come to class regularly and who practice on their own, I tend to push harder.

Dennis: In your relationships with family and friends, do you think that you are as direct and as blunt as you are with your students?

Dennis: Do you agree with the idea that the internal martial arts quiet the mind, lead to total body relaxation, increase longevity and promote meditation?

Richard: In a way, relaxation is important, but we are not just dissolving into a formless posture. The requirements necessitate use of strength to maintain alignment, and the way we're using our body. Are our legs relaxed when we're practicing? No, our legs are driving us, driving the movement. The waist is not relaxed when we're using the muscles in the waist and back to turn the waist. So we're

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using muscles, but using them in an efficient way. We want to be relaxed in a way so that we're not interfering with our own movement. The mind should also be relaxed yet attentive and not distracted.

Dennis: What other martial arts or forms did you study or do you practice?

Richard: I studied long fist, praying mantis, piqua, ba ji quan, chen style tai ji, and baguazhang. These are all styles of Northern Chinese wushu. What I practice now is just bagua.

Dennis: What about tai ji? You teach that in your class.

Richard: I do teach it in the class. Since 1999, however, I put all of my practice energies into bagua. That's become my own personal focus and what I'm keenly interested in. I still teach tai ji. People seem to want to learn it from me, so I continue to teach it.

Photo by Bill Fink



Richard Miller in deep stance wielding the 7 pound, 5 foot bagua saber.

Richard: What's important to me is to try to teach the art as clearly as I can and the way it's been taught to me. I want to preserve the art as it's been passed down. I do my best to find out what is the best way to reach individual students. I think I'm a patient teacher and I think I'm able to demonstrate what it is I'm teaching. So I present a model and goal for people to shoot for.

Richard: I guess I'm fairly direct in general, but I view the teacher/student relationship as very different from personal relationships. Outside of class, I have a "live and let live" philosophy. I actually see myself as being quite tolerant of others, except for those who defy my wishes.... just kidding.



Photo by Bill Fink

**Richard Miller in a bagua standing posture - lion's pose.**

moved to Livonia and I had to deal with being uprooted, being in a new social environment. I don't know how much that contributed to it, just being in a new place, but I stopped in large part caring about school. I did not do my homework.

Dennis: Did you ever resume your college education?

Richard: After dropping out and moving to Canada, I never returned to college.

Dennis: I actually find you to be a very good writer. I've read many things that you've written. You actually shared a really interesting piece when you were in the woods and practicing Baji. I found that very compelling. I've also enjoyed your writing in journals like Tai Chi Magazine.

Richard: When I was a little kid I used to write stories, but I never thought too much about it. So that was a kind of raw talent that I was able to develop somewhat.

Dennis: Several students, including myself, have asked you to create a video of your tai ji, and you seem reluctant. I find your tai ji beautiful to watch and the level and depth of your ability are profound in my mind. And yet, we've asked you and you won't do it. What's that about?

Richard: Well I guess I don't look at it in quite the same way. There are many instructional videos. I'm not really being humble, I just feel... I see a lot of core stuff out there and I don't want to those people contributing to the vast accumulation of martial art instructional videos.

huge saber that we wield around. And I've actually taken a particular interest and have gotten a lot stronger and have really enjoyed it.

Richard: Bagua weapons are interesting. There are two types. They're either peculiar or very big. It develops strength. I think most people find it beautiful and it's tremendously interesting to be wielding that enormous weapon in an artistic manner.

Dennis: What do you consider to be the health benefits of tai ji and bagua?

Richard: Starting from the outside, you can build strength in the legs, which keeps people as they get older from falling down, losing their balance. The body is taken through a wide range of motion. So you're using the body in a way that develops strength, flexibility and there's logic to it when the arts are practiced correctly; it's not harsh to the joints. I know the Chinese believe that the twisting which is emphasized in tai ji, and maybe even more so in bagua, has a beneficial effect on the organs in the body. Bagua even specifies various animal systems that are thought to benefit specific organs.

Dennis: Are you talking about the spiraling energy, which we call chan si jin?

Richard: I'm talking primarily about the twisting in the torso. Additionally, various amounts of compression and expansion occur. These kinds of motion have a massaging effect upon the organs.

Dennis: What about the emotional and mental health benefits of the internal martial arts, tai ji and bagua?

Richard: Well, speaking for myself, I know that when I first got into this stuff I was kind of drifting, not knowing what to do with my life. I was unfocused. And now it's clear to

I guess I'm fairly direct in general, but I view the teacher/student relationship as very different from personal relationships. Outside of class, I have a "live and let live" philosophy.

Dennis: Since getting to know you over the last 5 years, I've found you to be a serious person who works hard at your art, has strong opinions, and one who doesn't necessarily take the easiest path in life. I was thinking about this not only in terms of the internal martial arts, but also how this applies to other aspects of your life. For example, you've told me about your anti-war opinions back in Vietnam and your decision at that time to move to Canada. Would you like to share anything about that?

Richard: I'll just be frank. I wasn't a political person. It was a Muhammad Ali kind of thing. I wasn't echoing him, but I didn't want go over there and kill those people and I didn't want to get killed. What for? I didn't see a reason for that. It seemed kind of an irrational submission. I guess I wasn't enough of a patriot to go along with that program.

Dennis: So that influenced your decision to leave the country at that time?

Richard: Influenced it? It determined it. I had to leave the country. It was too late. I was drafted.

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Dennis: So why hadn't you just gone to college at that time and gotten a deferral?

Richard: I was in school at first. It's funny you talk about me being a serious person - I was not a serious student. I just went to a community college after high school because I didn't know what else to do. But I wasn't paying any attention and was not engaged in school so I did poorly in school. When I was younger, I lived in a Jewish area in Detroit and I was engaged and was interested. Then I

Dennis: I have actually seen you grimace a bit when you hear the word "master" when applied to tai ji, bagua, or martial arts. What are your feelings about this?

Richard: If you're referring to the word being used in reference to myself... you might detect a cringe. 'Master' is not a self appointed title and I've definitely not reached that level of achievement. In these arts, the masters are few, though I realize the term is useful for commercial purposes.

Dennis: Bagua and tai ji are described as being based on spiritual ideas. I'm referring to ideas of meditation, emptiness, centering your mind, stillness, creating stillness from movement, meditation in movement. You don't really hear about that with tae kwon do, karate or kickboxing.

Richard: That's an aspect of it. But the Chinese martial arts were created for fighting, self-defense, and concrete survival means. Being that it originated in China, they use the culture's philosophical terminology to describe the art, such as the principles of yin-yang, hard and soft, that each contains the other and neither is absolute. These things

are not just conceptual; they're manifest in the art.

You can see how they're used in turn from the principles of combat, where it's advantageous to redirect someone's force moving towards you. This is not, in its origin, a peaceful idea. There's a destructive side to that.

Dennis: One really interesting thing about Bagua is the

me looking back that I gained a lot of focus and developed an ability to stay with something. Personally, it has sharpened my mind and increased my capacity to stay concentrated on something.

Dennis: It almost sounds like it is a spiritual path for you - physical, mental, spiritual. Would you say that's true?

Richard: I don't know how to separate it really. I don't know how to divide myself into those compartments. It's just me. And, yeah, I'm engaged in a complete way. Not always, you know, some days are better than others.

Dennis: How can the slow movements of tai ji be considered a martial art?

Richard: The movements are complex, detailed and subtle. It only makes sense to do them slowly to understand them and manage all of the intricacies of the movement. It's not like doing jumping-jacks or jogging or simple activities. It's a complex art and by doing them slowly and methodically, we can really pay attention to the details, and try to notice our deficiencies.

Dennis: Again, you bring it back to the mind-body harmony.

Richard: Yes, this is not something done well mindlessly. It's too intricate.

Dennis: What about the breath? In the tradition of yoga, for instance, we do a lot of breathing exercises and breath work.



Richard: My teachers have always said, “breathe naturally, breath in and out through the nose, breath deeply, don’t rush your breathing, don’t hold your breath.” And you breathe into the tan-tien, filling your lower abdomen – specifically the area beneath your navel. To use imagery, imagine that it’s expanding, getting very full and large, like a Buddha’s belly – something like a huge expansion. If you think about that when you breathe, you get the feeling that the longer you do it the more you can feel in that area. The feeling is more substantial.

lot of strength to the back and waist. All these requirements result in a whole body strength and whole body integrity.

Dennis: What about the mind and the breath when you turn the circle?

Richard: Keep the breath low down in the abdomen. The mind is focused on the details of the movement. There are a lot of requirements that necessitate our attention. And if we’re inattentive, the back might be displaced, the chest may not be appropriately positioned, the head may not be held erect, the stepping not clean, the arms not twisted to the proper degree, our sight may not be focused where it should, or the breathing unnatural.

Dennis: You consider the turning, again, being mind, body, and breath integrity.

Richard: Yes, for sure. And I think the longer someone practices, the more adept they become at it. Then you can say it becomes meditative. Details are being managed with less thought. You are moving in this very unique way going around, and around, and around. I think a person can go into a very subjective world.

Dennis: Does that happen to you?

Richard: Yes. I’d like to experience more of it. It’s not easy to describe. I think there’s a kind of smooth feeling inside and it’s a feeling of singularity, oneness maybe. I’m always hesitant to use those loaded words. There’s a feeling of completeness.

Dennis: Can you discuss the importance of spiraling energy and force?

Richard: Our goal in the martial arts is to develop what we call whole body force. And what that is, literally, is to use the entire body in a very efficient way. That efficiency requires that the power originate in the lower part of the body where we meet the Earth or the floor, using the whole leg and that is transferred into the waist. The waist is the conductor between the upper and lower parts of the body, and from the waist the power moves to the torso and into whatever part of

the body through which the power is to be issued, such as the fist, or the elbow, or the shoulder. The twisting makes the body like a spring. There’s a coiling and uncoiling.

Dennis: So would you describe these particular martial arts as having the type of force like a screw being driven into an object, or some kind of whirlwind or tornado energy that has great amounts of spiraling power?

Richard: Yes, it’s an accumulation of power. It originates in the bottom of the body, or the lower part of the body. And it’s conveyed through a highly disciplined twisting action to a single point.

Dennis: What is the force called fa jing?

Richard: Fa jing means the issuing of force. The twisting, or chan si jin, is practiced all the time whether you do fa jing or not. We’re always trying to develop that kind of twisting energy, or twisting physicality. The fa jing is just the moments, or times in training, when we’re trying to issue the power.

Dennis: He Jinbao has said in our seminars on bagua that there are several different important aspects of bagua: health benefits, building strength, practicing the art in a beautiful way, and fighting. Personally I would add a fifth, which would be meditation. Do you agree with this?

Richard: Yes, it makes sense to me. I think that seems fairly encompassing.

Dennis: I know that you write songs and really enjoy music.

Richard: I don’t write music, I just write lyrics. I’m kind of a frustrated funk-rock musician and I’d love to be in a band playing soul music. I play the drum set. But I never really made the time for that. I’ve written song lyrics for fun really. But lately I’ve found somebody who I’ve collaborated with, a fellow student, Mike Woods. And we’re going to see if we can make something happen with that.

Dennis: Do you have any other interests that you really enjoy?

Richard: Even though I complain about not getting enough sleep, I have a bad habit of staying up too late reading at night. I’m finishing Graham Greene’s *The Human Factor*.

Bagua weapons are interesting. There are two types. They’re either peculiar or very big. It develops strength. I think most people find it beautiful and it’s tremendously interesting to be wielding that enormous weapon in an artistic manner.

He and John LeCarre are two of my favorites. And I love going to movies, especially ones involving the mafia.

Dennis: Are you open to new students joining your group, Great Lakes Wushu? And how can they find out more about you, what you do, and how can prospective students get in touch with you?

Richard: Our classes are open to anyone who wants to join. I encourage people to come and observe our classes and see what we’re doing, if it’s what they’re interested in, before they join. We have a website, [www.greatlakeswushu.com](http://www.greatlakeswushu.com) and the information about when

*There are more photos of Richard Miller and his students on pages 24 and 25.*

and where classes are held is on the website. (And also listed in the Calendar section of *The Crazy Wisdom Community Journal*.)

Dennis: There are lots of books on tai ji, lots of ways to get information, but not so much on bagua, especially for our system, yin style bagua. Can you recommend other ways to learn about bagua through books, video or seminars?

Richard: Our teacher, He Jinbao, travels from China annually to conduct workshops and will again be in Ann Arbor on October 13-15. It is open to new students, although we will have an enrollment limit. To further my own training, most years I go to Beijing for personal instruction.

Dennis: This coming fall you, Dr. James Arond-Thomas, and I will be offering a workshop called Meditation, Yoga Breathing and Tai Ji: Stilling the Mind, Healing the Body. Can you discuss a little bit more about this upcoming seminar?

Richard: Well, it’s a new opportunity for me, working with two physicians. It’s very interesting. I expect to learn a lot from participating in this event. I appreciate being invited. I think I have something to offer to this kind of seminar.

Dennis: I appreciate you agreeing to participate. And thanks a lot for your time and doing this very interesting interview.



Photo by Bill Fink

Richard Miller and Dennis Chernin in a bagua martial art application.

Dennis: One very unique aspect of bagua is turning in a circle for long periods of time. What do you see as the benefits of this?

Richard: It’s really smoothed out my own footwork and made it much more precise and fluid. It builds strength through the whole body because of the position you’re in when you turn; the degree of twisting the waist directs the

‘Master’ is not a self appointed title and I’ve definitely not reached that level of achievement. In these arts, the masters are few, though I realize the term is useful for commercial purposes.

stepping.

The upper body is held in a static posture. So we have this interesting dichotomy going on. The lower body is very mobile, active and the upper body is very stationary and static. The upper body is twisted in a way that develops a