

A peek into Master Ren Guangyi's Tai Chi class

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Master Ren Guangyi leads the practice

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In many ways, [Tai Chi](#) Master Ren Guangyi is a celebrity himself. With his highly celebrated student [Lou Reed](#), Master Ren has performed in front of tens of thousands in a single event. He demonstrated Tai Chi for the ex-President of the Czech Republic, [Vaclav Havel](#) at [the 20th Anniversary of Velvet Revolution Concert](#). He appeared on the stage of the 2006 Winter Olympic Games Opening, [Vivid Live](#) at [Sydney Opera House](#), Las Vegas, Carnegie Hall, and David Letterman's Late Show. One of his high-profile students [Jonathan Miller](#), ex-[AOL](#) CEO and President of [Fox Interactive Media](#), even talked about [Tai Chi Principles for Business and Life](#) published in *Kung Fu Tai Chi Magazine*. Master Ren choreographed a Tai Chi Sequence and taught the [Wolverine/X-Men Series](#) super star [Hugh Jackman](#) to perform in the Hollywood movie [the Fountain](#). Additionally, he played a leading role in a short indy film [Final Weapon](#). So what does his Tai Chi class look like?

I called Master Ren up in August about my interest to interview him. I did not hear back from him until a

couple of weeks later. When he returned my call he apologized profusely for not returning my call sooner -- actually he just got back from a trip to China. He is extremely humble and candid. Right away, he shared his story over the phone with me and how he struggled when he first came to the U.S. about 20 years ago.

Later in September, we met in a coffee shop at 8 am (one hour prior to the class) on a Sunday by his teaching studio. He was very casual wearing a black "got qi?" T-shirt designed and marketed by [Kung Fu Tai Chi Magazine](#). He told me that when he was trained in the Chen Village with the 19th Chen Style Tai Chi Grandmaster [Chen Xiaowang](#), he worked extremely hard. Sometimes he woke up in the middle of the night and practiced Chen Style New Frame (*Xin Jia*) ten times before returning to bed. There were times that he woke up a few times during a night just to practice. He had very high expectations for himself and disciplined himself strictly. He won many competitions in China and became an inheritor disciple of Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang. He has maintained those high standards for himself and his teaching, sometimes skipping meals for classes. He teaches 4 to 12 hours everyday including weekends. There are less than 10 days out of a year which he does not teach. When asked if his grueling teaching schedule becomes tiring, he responded by saying that that work is an excitement and energizes him.

[440 Studios](#) in the East Village, New York, has a neat concept. It rents out studios for a variety of performing arts classes, events, and rehearsals either on a short-term base or with a long-term contract. Master Ren has been hosting classes in the largest studio there for years. The studios are well equipped with 13-foot ceilings but no ambiance.

The class started with a [standing post \(Zhan Zhuang\)](#). Master Ren walked slowly among students as he monitoring each of them. He patiently adjusted their body alignment. To him, Zhan Zhuang is an essential part of Tai Chi curriculum promoting Qi cultivation. Unless the advanced students, he asked them not to raise their arms at shoulder height so the side muscle of the rib cage is relaxed, and arms should be rounded as holding a large beach ball so the chest is slightly tucked. He made sure their head is suspended with the chin slightly drawn inwards. Master Ren's training method is based on the individual's. Another example is that he wants beginners to practice a form at a high stance so their leg muscle will not tensed up and interfere the Qi movement. After a ten-minute Zhan Zhuang, he led the [Silk Reeling](#) practice (single arm first then double arms) for five minutes (use link [here](#) for a demo). Except a few, most students have been studying with Master Ren for a few years. But Master Ren takes the Silk Reeling drill very seriously; he still did the call out "One Shift, Two Step Out, Three Turn and Sink, and Four Shift and Step in) just to make sure they execute each small segment of one Silk Reeling movement with precision. Then they paired up and practiced a simplified [Push Hands](#) form. Master Ren considers Push Hands an important routine even for beginners. Besides learning the sensitivity of an opponent, it is also a good opportunity for students to know each other and build bonds. Afterwards, they practiced Chen Style 19 Form (created by Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang for Tai Chi

beginners and for basic drilling, see Ren's demo video on the left), Old Frame (Lao Jia), New Frame, and Chen Style 21 Form (a compact Tai Chi form created by Master Ren Guangyi).

New students were instructed by his senior students, Kai and Joey. Once they learned a few movements, Master Ren would provide further instruction. Kai is a 30 some year old professional. He was suffering from hypertension due to work related stress. He considers Tai Chi a panacea which alleviates his health problems. He is extremely appreciative for Master Ren's thorough teaching. He commented that Master Ren is so sincere in sharing his knowledge without any reservation. To repay Master Ren's kindness, he volunteers to teach fellow students when Master Ren is travelling. Ren probably charges the highest tuition not only in New York City but also in the Nation. Interestingly, Terry, a student of Ren for a few years, said that "it is student's responsibility to practice outside the class; otherwise we are wasting the teacher's time."

Other senior students are also willing to facilitate the classes. Electronic musician [Sarth Calhoun](#), a member of [Lou Reed's Metal Machine Trio](#), and renowned record producer [Tony Visconti](#) also assist the form practice. One student even helped to close the windows after class. The Sunday morning class has about 20 students with a mixed demographic. Many of them are well established in their career but in Ren's class they are like a big family working and helping each other. A few of them take a more advanced class in the afternoon to study weapon forms and other Tai Chi techniques. In between classes, Ren and his students went to a nearby restaurant for a steak lunch with a beer.

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