

Tai Chi for Advanced Students

Mastering Tai Chi is a life long commitment that begins with the external form. Focussing only upon the external form is one of the ways to waste many years of practice. At first it is necessary to follow the movements of your teacher but the only way to get 'inside' Tai Chi is to gain what is called *dong jing*/'understanding energy' by regular, daily solo practice. Attempting to make the external form 'perfect' will only result in frustration, regular practice and patience will gradually lead to deeper understanding of the true nature of Tai Chi. Long-term practice will lead to moments of revelation that will in turn motivate you to continue practicing. Everyone who practices will over time have such breakthroughs.

Confidence and discipline are two powerful aids to your Tai Chi development. If countless people before you can do it – you can too! Negative self-talk and excuses will just drain you, remind yourself why you are doing Tai Chi! Don't give up, remain mindful, calm and patient with yourself, practice **will** yield results.

A certain amount of physical discomfort is normal and to be expected when beginning Tai Chi. With regular daily practice (ideally twice daily) discomfort will disappear, discomfort is simply the body adjusting to new movements. Monitoring your posture, correct placement of the feet (roots) and upper body relaxation will also relieve tension and discomfort. Extreme and or chronic pain should be discussed with your teacher to ensure there are no underlying health problems.

The following points are central to all Tai Chi styles and require constant attention:

- **Stillness and relaxation** – Keep the mind calm, the emotions tranquil and avoid distracting thoughts. Remain focussed only upon the flow of the movements. Physically relax the body. Note the Chinese word *song*/relax does not have the same connotations as the English word, which implies total collapse into inertia. A state of relaxed alertness is meant by *song*. Relaxation also gets rid of awkward external force. Keep the mind focussed internally to avoid external distractions. Do not look around or chat to others during practice.
- **The breath** – the breath must remain regular, effortless and smooth. Forcing the breath to match the movements or holding the breath will damage your Qi, cause discomfort and disturb the mind. When the mind is clear, the body relaxed and the breath regular and comfortable, the body will become light and flexible and the spirit calm and focussed. In the beginning, natural breathing is recommended (inhale – abdomen out, exhale – abdomen in). After long-term practice reverse breathing can be gradually introduced (inhale – abdomen in, exhale – abdomen out). Reverse breathing generates more power and greatly improves Qi circulation but must be introduced slowly and with mindfulness to your practice.
- **Lightness** – “**Extreme softness leads to extreme hardness**” – essentially means that the power is hidden internally through outward relaxation. Great strength is developed through gentleness. Excess relaxation or force are both contrary to Tai Chi principles.
- **Slowness** – A central key to Tai Chi. All movements are deliberate, slow and evenly paced. Control of tempo quiets the mind and the breath. This allows the mind to move the body with minimal internal effort and minimal external force. Note that no matter how slow the movements, they are continuously linked without interruption. Potential speed is hidden in the slow movements because Tai Chi movements originate from the centre of the body and are controlled by the waist not just by the arms and legs. Just as the main axis of a machine turns slowly then the gears allow the smaller flywheels to spin faster, so it is with body. Slowness applies only to slow form but is not the rule for Fast Form and Pushing Hands where 'fast response for fast attack' is required.
- **Exactness** – Take great care to execute the movements accurately and avoid careless, sloppy practice. Constant mindfulness of the movements is required to move to higher levels of Tai Chi.
- **Perseverance and Patience** – Regular daily practice over the long term is required to obtain high results in Tai Chi and to understand its secrets. Try not to compare yourself or compete with others. Every individual is different and all that matters is your own progress, health, happiness and understanding. Don't give up; continue to practice with confidence! And the greatest tip – **proficiency is closely related to frequency and quality of practice.**

Specific points-

- **Feet** – Correct foundations are essential to balance, posture and relaxation. Ensure the feet are always shoulder width apart and the knees never over the toes to provide stability. Note that if the steps are too wide however,

centre of gravity is lost when stepping. When in a forward, archery stance such as Brush Knee, Twist Step never allow the heel off the ground unless stepping. Always step forward touching the heel to the ground first and touching the toe first when stepping backwards. Never lock the knees.

- **Maintain your centre.** – Keeping your centre of gravity low is central to Tai Chi solo practice and application (Pushing Hands). Your centre is the Lower Dan Tian (energy field) which is located below the navel. When we are babies and learn to walk our centre is very low. As we grow older it rises to make us top-heavy (notice the weak legs, lack of balance and heavy upper body in the elderly). Our centre also rises in cases of extreme anger and agitation. Keeping your centre low takes practice but attention to this point in Tai Chi provides control of movement, balance, lightness, mental clarity and calmness of spirit.
- **Adjust the posture as though suspended from the crown.** – Keeping the body aligned with gravity with the spine naturally straight and the channels open allows the body to move with a central axis. The vertical line from crown through perineum to the soles of the feet is to be maintained throughout all movements. Imagining a bowl of water on top of the head and another in the lower abdomen helps maintain your posture and discourages awkward, jerking movements. Holding the body straight through gently lifting the head from the crown relaxes the spine and equally distributes the body weight over both feet, this is called balancing Heaven and Earth. Ensure the neck and jaw are relaxed with the chin slightly tucked in.
- **Sink the chest** - When you sigh the chest drops and relaxes naturally. Do not try to force the chest to drop. Relaxing the chest allows diaphragm and upper abdominal area to relax and enhances lung capacity. Sinking the chest also naturally rounds the scapulae (shoulder blades). Imagine hugging a beach ball to your chest, seen from above, your shoulders would appear rounded with the elbows down and the chest relaxed. Imagine tennis ball under each armpit and then relax the shoulders and drop the elbows, this gives the feeling of the arms being relaxed and ‘floating’. This is the feeling of sinking the chest.
- **Relax the joints and open the groin** – Opening the hips allows greater balance, power and flexibility as well as greater Qi circulation. When the hip joint is closed the groin becomes blocked and the blood vessels, meridians, lymph and nerves in the inguinal area will be folded and closed. This will cause circulation problems and block Qi flow. Keep the knees loose and open. Learn to sink down from the hips to the heels, don’t take the weight onto your knees. To help further, practice sinking down whilst concentrating on the ankles and down to the soles of the feet. Opening the hips relaxes the spine and upper body and keeps the centre of gravity in the lower Dan Tian.
- **Relax the waist** – Free movement of the waist, which guides all movements, is essential to Tai Chi. Initiate all movements from the waist, relaxing the limbs. Imagining a light shining from the navel that moves smoothly from east to west without jerking or bobbing up and down encourages smooth turning of the waist. With constant practice your understanding of this principle will deepen.
- **Maintain an even tempo** – Try to control your speed from beginning to end. A common trap for beginners is to speed up as the form progresses. Keep the speed uniform, smooth and even throughout.
- **Breathing** – generally sinking back, opening, beginning movements are inhale and pushing forward, closing and finishing movements are exhale. All breathing should be natural and unforced. Never, ever hold your breath. Breathe only through the nose and try to breathe from the lower abdomen rather than upper abdominal and chest breathing. It is better to take 2 cycles of breath in one movement than to force your breath to match a movement that takes longer to perform. Reverse breathing (see over) should be introduced only when you fully understand the natural breathing method. There is no right or wrong time to start reverse breathing as everyone’s progress and health situation is different.
- **Qi/Chi** – To help relax and get Qi feeling imagine you are in a sea of Qi and feel slight resistance against your limbs as you move, relax totally as though suspended and supported from all sides. With practice you will feel as though your whole body is breathing, absorbing Qi directly through the pores, with the body and mind feeling very light and comfortable and the mind calm and clear. After practice you may find the legs a little tired but very shortly after this will disappear and you will feel full of energy and very relaxed. Try not to concentrate too hard on the Qi aspect of Tai Chi as this will all come naturally with time.
- **Practice!** – Always repeated and cannot be stressed enough. Practicing once a week will have you chasing your tail for years. Regular practice is the **only way**. There is a saying which applies to Qi Gong practice as well as Tai Chi – “If you do it, you get it; if you don’t do it, you don’t get it”. Another wise man also said “the highest things are often the simplest and the simplest things are often the most difficult”. Try to get inside Tai Chi by yourself with daily practice.