

Proper Tai Chi Practice

In order to learn Tai Chi well, there are some excellent guidelines. I have specially written them down here for my enthusiastic colleagues to reference when practicing this art. According to the traditional way of training in China carried down through the ages, the following are important guidelines and methods.

1. Xu Ling Ding Jin

Ding Jin means that the head should be held straight (very perpendicular), with your concentration centered at the top of the head. You should not use strength otherwise your neck will become stiff, and the Chi (energy) and blood will not flow through. You should be in a state of natural void. Without Xu Ling Din Jin, you cannot become alert, and if you practice Tai Chi in a dejected way like a sick man, how will you learn it well? Master Cheng Man Ching explained this even more clearly. He said,

“Xu Ling Din Jin is like hanging from the top of your head. It is like having a pigtail (at the top of your head), which is tied to a beam and your body is hanging above the ground. Like this, the whole body can spin. But if your head faces down or up, or moves left or right, then you cannot spin.”

Summing up all of the above, when you are practicing Tai Chi, you must assume a perfectly straight and natural pose with the whole body like “one family,” and your jing (power), chi (life energy) and shen (spirit) concentrated at the top of your head. Do not allow any part of your body to move involuntarily.

2. Han Xiong Ba Bei:

Han Xiong means: let the chest sink in a little. The chi will naturally go along the spine and sink toward the dan tien (energy center). When the chest sinks inward, the heart will at the same time withdrawal inward toward the back. It is important not to throw out your chest. When you do that, your heart will also be pushed forward and can be harmed more easily. Furthermore, when your chest is thrown outward, the chi will well up into the area of the chest, and you will become heavy on the top and light below. Your feet will seem to float and you cannot stand firmly. When pushed, you will fall.

Ba Bei means: push out the back (the spine). When you do

this, the chi will naturally sink down along the spine toward the dan tien, and your buttocks will naturally draw inward. If you can let your chest sink inward (Han Xiong) you'll also naturally push out your back (Ba Bei). If you can Ba Bei, your chi will flow through the three gates. These are located at the bottom tip of your tailbone, at the middle of the spine, and at the base of the skull bone (called Wei Lu guan, Jia Ji guan and Yu Zhen guan respectively). If chi can pass through these three gates, then it will also pass through the Ren Mai and Tui Mai (located at the middle of the chest and back respectively).

All illnesses will be eliminated from the body and life will be prolonged; at the same time, whenever required, the strength of the whole body will issue forth from the back (i.e. the spine), that such force will carry off all that is before you.

3. Chen Jian Chi Zhou:

Chen Jian means let the area of the two shoulder girdles (shoulder blades) be naturally relaxed and dropped down, and the two arms would seem to hang on strings. You should never use strength to raise your shoulders. If the shoulders are raised, then the chi will follow upward to the shoulders and create a condition of being heavy on the top and light on the bottom. All of your strength will be tied up at the shoulders, and your lower body will not have any strength. At the same time, it will become easier to admit illness because with the shoulders raised, the internal organs will change their positions and move upward, losing their comfortable natural positions. If this is persisted for long, internal illness will certainly result.

Chui Zhou: means to let the two elbows point downward with the upper arms "standing" straight (perpendicular). If the two elbows are raised either to the left or right, then the shoulders cannot droop downward. If the shoulders cannot droop downward, then you cannot muster your strength in the area of the waist and thighs.

4. Song Yao Song Kua:

Song means: loosen or relax. Yao (the waist) is the lord of the body. Kua (the hips) are the hub center between the upper half and the lower half of the body. If you cannot loosen the waist and hips, your body will become a stiff as a stick, and fall easily. If you cannot loosen your hips, the upper and lower halves of the body cannot turn easily, and your chi cannot descend to the soles of your feet (called Yong Quan). If you cannot "grow roots," the center of gravity of your body will not be stable. Master Cheng Man Ching said, "Yong Quan (specific points near the balls of the feet) must have roots, otherwise the Yao(waist) will not have confidence. You may strenuously practice until you die and yet find no remedy." These are really sincere words and earnest wishes. If you can loosen your waist and hips, your movements will become naturally lively, and you can change from void (yin) to full (yang) and vice versa easily.

The Tenets of Tai Chi say, “the commands and intentions originate from the waist.” They also say, “If you have areas where you cannot find opportunity or power, your sickness is to be found in the waist and thighs.”

Master Cheng Man Ching in his posthumous work says, Formerly when my master, Yang Cheng Fu, taught me tai chi, he would every day repeat several tens of times, ‘Loosen, loosen, must loosen, must loosen completely,’ or he would say the opposite, ‘Not loose, not loose, not loose—the way you get beaten.

You must loosen until the waist is so resilient that it is like there are no bones and it can be broken a hundred times. In learning Tai Chi, if you realize the condition of Song Yao Song Kua, all others will be easy. The Tenets of Tai Chi say, “Yao (waist) is like the axle of the chariot, whereas Kua (the hips) are like the flags.” All these go to illustrate the important nature of the waist and hips in regard to the practice of Tai Chi.

5. Xu Shi Fen Qing:

Xu Shi Fen Qing means: void and full must be clearly distinguished. In learning Tai Chi, the primary requisite is to clearly distinguish between void and full. Void is yin and full is yang. Briefly speaking, when you practice Tai Chi, you must never place your body weight on both legs. If you put your body weight on the right leg, then your right leg and left arm are full, and your left leg and right arm are void. If you put your body weight on the left leg, then your left leg and right arm are full, and your right leg and left arm are void. It is necessary to make the distinction clearly, and therefore your movements will be light and lively without the use of any strength.

When it is said that you walk like a cat, and use strength like drawing silk, this means your movement should be light and lively. If you do not distinguish clearly between void and full, then your steps will be clumsy, and you cannot turn around easily with the result that you can be lead around by others. Distinguishing between void and full can be compared with the example of peddling of a bicycle: if the right leg applies pressure downward, then the left leg should relax and follow upward in accordance. When the left leg presses down, then the right leg must relax and follow upward in accordance with the movements of the left leg.

Naturally, you can then go as fast or as slowly as you please, and your movement forward will not be impeded. But if you press with both legs at the same time, and the pressure is equal on both sides, you’ll stop altogether and cannot move at all. The Tenets of Tai Chi illustrate this principal by saying, “doubleweightedness impedes movement, whereas weight on one side facilitate sit.”

6. Shang' Xia Xiang Sui:

Shang' Xia Xiang Sui means: top and bottom should follow one another. This means when practicing Tai Chi, the limbs and the upper body should not be allowed to move involuntarily. When you want to move, then the whole body, top and

bottom, inside and outside, all move together like one family. Once you move, there must be nothing that does not move. The Tenets of Tai Chi say, “Your feet should have roots, and your strength rises through your thighs. Your waist is the focal point of all movement. Your form reaches your fingertips. And your vibration reaches your hair. All these together complete one chi.”

Your feet move, your waist moves, your hands move – glance and indeed every cell of your body all move together in accordance with your intention and chi. Only in this way can it be said the top and bottom follow one another. If any area does not follow, then the force of your whole body may become scattered and cannot be concentrated and directed.

7. Nei Wai Xiang He:

Nei Wai Xiang He means: your interior and exterior must correspond. This means that in learning Tai Chi, one first trains the mind, then the body and limbs. The Tenets of Tai chi say, “the mind is the commander, and the body, its orderly.”

It also says, “Yi Chi (your intention and your energy) are the master, and your bones and flesh are the servants.” If your intention can be the master, then naturally your spirit (Shen) will pierce through the top of your head. If your spirit can reach the top of your head, naturally your alertness will be brought into play.

When your alertness is brought into play, naturally your movements become light and lively. The main point in learning the Tai Chi forms (movements) are encompassed in Xu Shi Kai He (the extending and withdrawing or opening and closing of void {yin} and full {yang}).

When we say opening, we mean that not only do the hands and legs extend outward, but the intention must also open out. When we say closing, we mean that not only do the hands and legs withdrawal inward, but also the intention must follow suit. The Tenets of Tai Chi say, “you must have three combinations on the interior, and three combinations on the exterior.” By the three interior combinations, we mean that the heart and intention must combine, the intention and chi must combine, and chi and strength must combine. By the three exterior combinations, we mean that the shoulders and hips must correspond, the elbows and knees must correspond, and the hands and legs must correspond. In the Tenets is the following: “When the form opens out, chi withdraws; when chi opens out, the form withdraws.” This statement has puzzled many a colleague in Tai Chi, who after exhausting their life energy, still failed to appreciate its profound principal. I have therefore set out a few of the stances in the form of Tai Chi in order to explain:

In Beginning of Tai Chi, the form opens and the chi closes; the chi withdraws and the form extends. In white stork spreads wings (Bai HeLiangChi), the form opens and chi closes. In Ward Off (Peng) both the form and chi open. In Pull Back (Lu) the form and chi close. In Press (Ji) and Push (An), both the

form and chi open.

Generally speaking, in a withdrawing movement, both form and chi close; and in extending movement, both the form and chi open. When receiving a push, both form and chi close.

When pushing, both form and chi open. In understanding this when learning Tai Chi, you are not only protecting your health and preserving your life, it can also be said that you are gradually entering the innermost recesses of the profound principles of Tai Chi.

8. Xiang Lian Bu Duan:

Xiang Lian Bu Duan means: one's movements must be continuous and never broken. In practicing Tai Chi, it is most objectionable to use one's brute force, intentionally starting, and then as though you have come to the end, stopping after delivering your strength. In this way, you can easily be taken advantage of, at the time when your new force has not yet been summoned.

This is why in practicing, you should use your intention and not your strength so that in the stillness there is motion; and although there is motion, there is stillness, from the beginning to the end.

9. Dong Zhong Qui Jing:

Dong Zhong Qui Jing means: strive for calmness whilst in action. In practicing Tai Chi, it is absolutely forbidden to leap about so one is streaming with sweat and panting like a buffalo. One should use calmness to control one's action, using one's breath to control one's movements, and making one's movements correspond with one's breathing. Although you are in action, you are calm. The slower your movements can be made, the better. When your movements are slow, you can breathe deep and long, and your chi will sink to your dan tien and naturally you will not suffer from palpitation and panting; your chi will naturally penetrate your bone.

Some people ask: in Tai Chi, if the movements are slow and strength should not be used, how then would one be able to protect one's self? Little is realized that in Tai Chi, one strives at "Subduing one's self to follow outside pressure." Thus when you have no pressure, you remain still. When the pressure is slight, you move first; and when the pressure is great, your intention (or mind) has already deflected it. How abstruse this is!

The Tenets of Tai Chi say, "In your stillness you sense movement; although you move, yet you are still. Because the pressure changes, it provides you with the opportunity to demonstrate the miraculous." Grandmaster Du Xin Wu said, "movement and stillness have no beginning; changes have no end; here void, here full; naturally natural." This saying has a meaning that is extremely profound. I hope that students will carefully realize it.

10. Yong Yi Bu Yong Li:

Yong Yi Bu Yong Li means: use your intention (Yi) and not your strength (Li). Tai Chi is a kind of profound art where you use your mind and do not your physical strength. Therefore it should not be looked upon as any kind of martial art. To look at it as such would deprive it of its art value and its philosophical foundation. Hence, the Tenets of Tai Chi say, "How do we accurately speak about using the body? Our chi and mind (or intention) is lord, and our flesh and bones are but servants." Because of this, when you practice, your whole body should be completely relaxed. There should not be a single iota of brute strength remaining within your muscles and bones. Your blood adds pulses to bind your body. Only then can you lithely affect changes, and spin around as you wish.

There are people who are puzzled as to how one can develop strength without using strength. Little is it realized that the human body has a network of passages (through which our vital energy {chi} circulates. These are like streams and rivulets running into large rivers. When the streams, rivulets and rivers are not blocked in any way and water runs naturally from its distant source along these waterways, then you will gain incomparable strength.

The network of passages in our bodies (called Jing Luo) is just like that. If there's nothing to cause a blockage, then our blood and chi will flow naturally to all parts of the body, and wherever you intend, your chi will follow. If you continue to practice every day for a long time, you will receive this injection of blood and chi that circulates through your whole body without stoppage or stagnation at any time; your real chi will become abundant.

Naturally, illnesses cannot develop, and there's no question of your life being prolonged. For those who have learned Tai Chi well, their outside appearance is as soft as cotton, distinguished and learned. But inwardly, they are firm and strong and nothing can stand in their way.