

MINDFUL MOVEMENT

“Life is movement, movement is life – even eating becomes enjoyable not just mechanical; a disconnection from other ‘goings on’.”

Learn how to improve your t'ai chi by first knowing WHY you are practising. Everyone should have a purpose. Ask yourself what you would like to change, to resolve some concern in your life. Then focus on how t'ai chi can help. When you practice what aspect lets you feel good, joyful, as if you are doing something meaningful. Then embrace it, explore it and grow with the sensation. You are then starting to understand what t'ai chi really means, the spirit of t'ai chi.

If you want more mobility then notice what makes you move more freely; if you want to be less stressed and tense, notice the aspect of t'ai chi that really relaxes you. Understanding how t'ai chi can work for you to improve your life is the ultimate discovery. I am here to help you discover yourself through t'ai chi.

There are 5 main elements one needs to understand and integrate when practising t'ai chi movement forms to appreciate its wisdom and wholeness. Each element does not need to be completed before you move onto the next. They affect each other, and by improving one you improve all the others.

1. Stillness in action through postural awareness
2. Quietness of mind and relaxation
3. Sinking of weight to find centre and balance
4. Mobility and co-ordination to develop fluidity
5. Cultivating and nursing chi through mind intent

At the beginning of each class we stand or sit still for several minutes to focus on internal sensations and posture. It is only through stillness that we can truly listen to what is happening inside our bodies and the wisdom it reveals. Initially it is more about recognising the inappropriate muscle tensions and poor body alignment. But in time we learn to adjust with minimum effort and enjoy the ease of being still.

With stillness thoughts can begin to wander so breathing awareness helps to connect mind to posture and direct attention to the centre and specific parts of the body. Visualisation helps; imagine yourself in a quiet environment such as a tranquil rain forest. Soon you become quiet from within and are able to focus on what your body is doing.

Here are a few other tips to help quieten the mind and relax in t'ai chi movement which are also essential in order to treat disease and maintain health. Being quiet helps you be relaxed and being relaxed helps you be quiet.

- ◆ Avoid anxiety about performance, but maintain your determination. Be 'correct' having right thinking patterns, form and intentions; Be 'accurate' having correct posture and focus; Be 'consistent' practicing daily for the rest of your life (there are no short cuts).

- ◆ Don't let emotions interrupt your quiet mind. When you are feeling too much anger, fear, sadness, or excitement, do not practice. Also don't let desires for money, position, or power interrupt your quiet mind.
- ◆ Relax the body from head to feet and let your energy sink to the 'Lower Burner'. Don't begin practicing the movements until you feel quiet and relaxed.
- ◆ While moving keep shoulders lowered, elbows lower than hands, relax the buttocks and lower back.
- ◆ Focus your mind on the movements instead of on other things then the energy will follow the movements.
- ◆ Relax and lower your eyes. Relax your facial muscles which will be of great help in relaxing your mind.

"Song" is a Chinese word, which may be translated into "relaxation" in English. However it encompasses much more in practice, involving loosening and stretching-out as well as postural and structural alignment.

Without over stretching and getting stiff, imagine your joints opening, loosening, the shoulder joint can exemplify this. If you gently stretch out your shoulder joint, you will feel a small dimple on the top. If you tense the shoulder joint, the dimple disappears. Some joints are probably not possible to really stretch out but use your mind to visualise the joints loosening. In the torso, the loosening should be vertical. Visualise from the centre of the head, stretching upwards while your waist is stretching downwards, therefore loosening or elongating your torso. Your hip joints and knee joints should stretch gently outward in a curve. This is a form of conscious relaxation because when your joints are gently stretched and being 'Song' you will find it impossible to be tense. Being Song helps your Qi flow, builds strength and improves flexibility to the tendons, ligaments and muscles.

By realigning the body to attain and maintain correct natural alignment of the skeleton several things result. Internal organs are able to locate in the body as they were designed to enabling them the opportunity to function at their optimum. Secondly, correct natural alignment enables the skeleton to assume its job of supporting the body as it was designed to do. Consequently the ligaments, tendons, tissue and muscles of the body can also assume the particular job they were designed for, namely to support the skeleton and not expend additional energy or create unnecessary tensions. If we can achieve and maintain this natural state, then we can allow the body to function naturally and optimally. In this state, we have a chance of achieving the state of Song from the inside out rather than superficially from the outside in as we all tend to do.