

Your Tai Chi Companion

Part Two – Moving On



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Yiheyuan Martial Arts

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Who is this guide for?

This guide is for you if:

- You have been doing Tai Chi for a while (anything from a few weeks to a few years) and you want to explore the art more deeply.
- You have been feeling a bit “stuck” or wondering where you are going with your Tai Chi.
- You just want to check that you’re doing it “properly”.
- You’d like to enjoy more of the health benefits that Tai Chi practice offers.
- You have been feeling that what you have seen so far is just the tip of an iceberg and you’re ready to dive in and glimpse some of the secrets of the ancient masters!
- You intend to take your Tai Chi skills to a high level and want to make sure that all your foundations are secure first.
- Or maybe you just want to be able to understand what the more experienced students are talking about!

Your Tai Chi Companion can help you to:

- Improve your Tai Chi skills.
- Deepen your understanding of Tai Chi.
- Enjoy more benefits from your Tai Chi practice.
- Prepare for even deeper levels of study.

Exploring Tai Chi is one of the most rewarding pastimes there is but from the outside it can seem to be an impenetrable mystery and many give up before they even scratch its surface. Your Tai Chi Companion is designed to be like a best friend who will be right beside you on each stage of your Tai Chi journey, answering your questions and explaining things as you go along, so that you can enjoy this process of discovery every step of the way and turn a mystery into mastery.

What's in this guide?

This booklet is in three sections.

- *The first section* will give you an opportunity to look very carefully at your Tai Chi to see exactly where you are with it. Using the Tai Chi Principles as a guide, you can decide for yourself whether or not you have developed any unusual habits that might need a bit of tweaking to make your Tai Chi practice more comfortable, safe and enjoyable.
- *The second section* lists twelve common Tai Chi errors and how you can avoid them.
- *The final section* offers some exercises, tips, suggestions and insights that could help you to enrich your experience of Tai Chi.

This is an Intermediate-level guide which is mainly concerned with how you stand and move (your Tai Chi forms) as a basis for more advanced studies later on.

A word about styles

In this guide I will focus on general principles, as laid down in the Tai Chi Classics¹. All authentic Tai Chi is based on these principles, whatever style you practice. Authentic styles include: Chen Style, Yang Style, Cheng Man Ching Style, Wu Style, Sun Style and Hao Style and the more modern Beijing forms such as 24 step simplified, 48 step and 42 step, which combine elements of the other traditional styles.

Having a look at other styles can help you to decide which one is right for you. For example, some people may find the very low stances of Chen Style or the inclined position of Wu Style quite challenging compared to, for example the Cheng Man Ching, Sun or Yang styles or the Simplified Beijing 24 step form. Depending on the availability of teachers, you may not have much choice in this matter but do check out the various styles on YouTube so that at least you are aware of what other people are doing.

A word about Tai Chi as a fighting art

Tai Chi is a martial art – one of the oldest and most effective in the world – but you can also practice it just as a form of gentle exercise if you choose to. This guide will be helpful to you, whether or not you want to explore the martial aspects.

If self-protection is your main reason for taking up Tai Chi, or if you want to study and practice the full martial art in a balanced way, that's great; but for now we'll mainly focus on posture and movement, which will provide a solid foundation for the development of your fighting skills later on. Some of the martial reasons for the structural "rules" that follow will be mentioned as we go along and you'll find a summary of the main martial principles of Tai Chi at the end of this guide.

If you would prefer not to think about the fighting side of Tai Chi, that's OK too – they won't be mentioned very much in this guide.

Of course, if you do find the martial arts side of it even slightly interesting, you are likely to get even more benefits from understanding what each movement was designed for, which could help you to do them more accurately and so get the maximum health benefits from them.

You would also be well advised to explore these aspects if you think you might eventually like to take your Tai Chi to an advanced level and perhaps even teach it to other people. Even if your intention is only to teach Tai Chi for health and relaxation, it is useful to be well-informed about the art form you are using and where the movements came from.

The Tai Chi Principles

The main principles of Tai Chi, as described in the Tai Chi Classics¹, are those to do with how to stand and how to move. All Tai Chi practitioners, of all authentic styles, try to follow these principles, whether they are doing it for their health and well-being or for self-protection as well. These are the “rules” which make Tai Chi what it is and allow you to gain so many benefits from it. Here’s a summary:

1. Your feet should be planted firmly on the ground as if you have roots growing deeply into the earth.
2. Your knees should be unlocked and your weight sunk down into your legs as if you are settling into a comfortable chair.
3. Your head should be held upright, as if suspended by an invisible piece of string from the crown-point, so that your gaze is level.
4. Your spine should be straight and upright with your tailbone dropped towards the floor. This will probably happen naturally if you do all of 1–3 above, and you will also find that...
5. Your body can then feel relaxed and supple and...
6. Your shoulders and elbows can drop and relax.
7. Each part of your body can then feel connected to every other part, “like a string of pearls” so that every movement comes from your whole body rather than just one limb.
8. When you take a step: let your waist lead, place your foot where it needs to go, then transfer your weight.
9. Direct the flow of movement through your legs, waist, arms, hands and fingers, like a whip.
10. With practice, your movements will then become balanced, smooth, co-ordinated, efficient and precise.
11. Eventually, your movements will become continuous and flowing, like a river, without interruptions or hesitation, so that someone watching you would not be able to see where one movement ends and the next one begins.

Where are you now?

With these principles in mind, you can now begin to take an honest look at what you are doing when you practice your Tai Chi form. You can check:

- *Your posture* – the general way you stand and “carry yourself”.
- *Your stances* – the various positions your body moves into and out of as you go through your sequence or “form”.
- *How you move* from one position to another – checking as you go that you are moving in a way that is safe for your back and your joints and allows you to feel balanced and comfortable at all times.

Then if necessary, you might like to make a few adjustments and explore some of the benefits you can gain by doing so.

Before you start

Although not essential, you might like to do one or two of the following to help you in this process.

- Make a note of any feedback your teacher has given you about your Tai Chi. (Anything he or she goes on and on about regularly is likely to be something you could do with examining a bit more closely.)
- If you have a full-length mirror handy, that could be useful.
- If you can get a bit of video footage of yourself doing Tai Chi, that would also be very helpful – not to show to anyone; just for your own personal use. You can always delete it afterwards – unless of course you’re so happy with it you want to put it on YouTube!
- If you don’t have access to a video camera, a few still pictures of your main postures could help a lot. What we feel that we are doing, from the inside, isn’t always what we are actually doing, as seen from the outside, so it’s a good idea to check that these two match up.

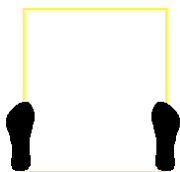
Remember

- *Go easy on yourself!* You will need to be very honest with yourself without being overly critical; after all, the main reason for any of us doing Tai Chi is because we enjoy it. Tai Chi is not a “performance art”; it’s a process of self-discovery and self-expression. Potentially it’s a deeply enriching and satisfying experience, so always look at your efforts kindly, perhaps with a sense of curiosity, and be ready to enjoy any discoveries you might make.
- *You’re the expert on you!* We are all unique individuals and you know your own body better than anyone else; so if your knees just don’t do the kind of things that everyone else’s knees seem to take in their stride, that’s OK – just explore what does work for your particular knees!

So, if you’re ready, let’s look at some of the things we thought we had pretty much sorted when we were about two years old – but Tai Chi does them differently!

1. How to stand up

A Tai Chi sequence begins and ends with simply standing upright in a relaxed position, either with the heels together and the toes pointing out a bit (between “five to one” and “ten to two”) or with the feet together, toes pointing forwards. In most styles we then step out (usually to the left but in some forms to the right) into a shoulder-width position.



Notice that the feet are level and the toes are pointing forward.

If possible, stand up now, step into a shoulder-width position (horse-riding stance) and then look down at your feet.

Are they level or is one a bit further forward than the other?

Are your feet both pointing forwards or are either or both of them pointing outwards or inwards?

You might like to take the time to adjust your feet as necessary. Although the above position is what you are aiming for, if there is a good reason why you are unable to do this (perhaps because you are unable to stand up or because your arthritis or old ankle/knee/hip injury prevents you from lining up your feet like this) don't worry, just do the nearest you can manage. You can still enjoy Tai Chi.

To be exact, it's actually the inside edges of your feet that are parallel in this stance. Feet are roughly triangular, so if you line up the outside edges of your feet with parallel floorboards, you will find that your toes turn in a bit, making you appear knock-kneed. Experiment and, if possible, have a look in a mirror.

Shoulder Check

You might also like to take this opportunity to have a look at what you think of as "shoulder-width".

If you have a full-length mirror, see if the distance between the outside edges of your feet is the same as the distance between the outside edges of your shoulders. If you don't have a mirror, you could use a tape measure.

This sounds obvious but you wouldn't believe how many people wildly under-estimate or over-estimate the width of their shoulders!

In some styles the stances may be wider, eg Chen style, but learning the shoulder-width measure is still helpful when your teacher talks about "twice shoulder-width" or "half shoulder-width".

2. How to sit down without bending your knees!

“Is that even possible?” You may well ask! It’s certainly a strange thing to say, but when you get what we mean by this one, it can save you from a whole host of problems.

To help you to get it, try the following experiments:

1. *Stand still and upright with your legs locked out straight.* Due to the shape of the human spine, you will find that you have a hollow in the middle of your back so that if you were standing against a wall you could fit a cushion behind the small of your back while your shoulders and bottom touched the wall.
2. *From standing still and upright, bend your knees.* You will probably find that you are now feeling tension around your knee joints and you may even be bending forwards a little and sticking your bottom out at the back. If you were standing against a wall, you would probably fall over.
3. *From standing still and upright, sit down* as if you are resting most of the weight of your body on a fairly high stool, keeping your knees soft and your body relaxed, loose and upright. If you were standing against a wall, your back would be flat against it and would simply slide straight down it as your weight sagged into your legs.

You will have discovered from these experiments that, although your legs don’t stay locked out straight in either of them, the result is very different. Why is that?

It’s quite a subtle concept but deliberately bending your knees puts your attention into the knees and everything tends to tense up in that area, making it quite uncomfortable and affecting the posture and balance of your whole body.

On the other hand, the idea of “sitting down” and relaxing into your legs allows you just to let go and trust your bone structure and ligaments to support you while the muscles and tendons around your knees remain soft and comfortable. Your whole body feels balanced and stable and at ease. This one subtle point is the key to the whole of Tai Chi!

It may seem a bit of a grand statement that just sitting down into your legs instead of deliberately bending your knees is “the key to Tai Chi!”, but it’s actually true and its importance really can’t be emphasized enough.

Why is “sitting down” so important?

- It’s the reason why Tai Chi is so good for improving balance and preventing falls. The weight of your body is now centrally distributed, relaxed and closer to the ground, without putting strain on your knees. Your movements naturally then become more cat-like and less like someone walking on stilts.
- It’s the key to staying on your feet and using the power of your whole body to protect yourself.
- Because of the way the spine is constructed, your vertebrae can move more freely in this position so that you can turn your waist and tuck your tailbone under: two essential Tai Chi skills, as you will see later.

Verticality Check

Now might also be a good time to find out if you are leaning in any direction. Your body should be vertical and you may well feel that you are very upright. However, it is odd how our own internal perceptions can sometimes be a bit out when compared with what we are actually doing when viewed from the outside.

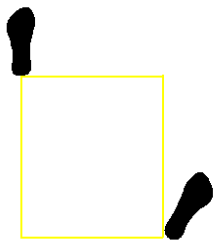
If your teacher has been saying that you tend to lean backwards and you are convinced that you are not, put it to the test and have someone take a photo of you from the side after you have settled into your “horse-riding stance”.

If you find that you were leaning forwards or backwards, try it with your back pressed against a wall. It might feel strange at first but your sense of spatial awareness and balance will gradually adjust to the new setting.

3. How to walk forwards

Many Tai Chi students are fine when standing still in a horse-riding stance, as described above, but as soon as they take a step forwards, they tend to put one foot directly in front of the other, as if they are walking on a tightrope, which tenses up the whole body and makes them less able to sink down and more likely to lose their balance.

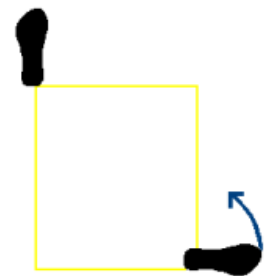
In Tai Chi, we walk forwards with feet at shoulder width, like walking along train tracks with one foot on each track. This is important because it helps us to keep our balance and to use our power more effectively.



In a basic shoulder-width forward stance, your front foot points forwards and your heels are placed on the diagonally-opposite corners of a square (or you may prefer to think of walking along parallel tram lines or train tracks). Notice that the back foot is at a comfortable angle so that you don't strain your knee or ankle joints. You can experiment with different angles until you find the foot position that's most comfortable for you.

Leaving your back foot stuck out at right angles puts a twist on all your leg joints, so remember to bring the toes around with you when you change direction. The normal way to do this is to keep your heel on the floor and turn your toes in a bit.

Some people like to slide the heel backwards instead because they find it more comfortable so this is an option if you have difficulty turning on the heel. However, turning on the heel becomes more important if you want to take your skills to a higher level and perhaps learn how to use Tai Chi for self-defence. For now, the most important thing is to avoid leaving your back foot sticking out and risking damage to your joints.



Forward Stance Check

If you have access to a floor with floorboards, step into a forward stance with the inside edge of your front foot in line with the boards. The sideways distance between your heels should be roughly three large floorboards or six narrow floorboards in width, the width of your own shoulders.

Notice that it is the *inside* edge of the front foot which is lined up with the floorboards.

When you settle your weight into your front leg a little, your knee is then in a comfortable position pointing in the same direction as your toes. (It won't be completely above your toes because your legs are forming a triangle with the floor.)



Check out where the white line touches the floor in the picture, which shows the correct position. (If you were to try to get your knee directly over your foot you would end up lop-sided and unbalanced.)

When you “sit down” and relax into your legs in this position, as if you are in a comfy chair, your tailbone drops and your spine lengthens, relieving pressure on your lower back and allowing your vertebrae to move more freely. You can then turn your waist more easily and you become more stable, comfortable and balanced.

This is the main reason why Tai Chi has helped so many older people to reduce their risk of falling² and, if you are interested in the self-protection aspects of Tai Chi, you can see (and perhaps feel for yourself) that this position makes you less likely to be knocked over in a fight and more able to issue your own power against an opponent.

4. How to avoid “Chicken-leg”

This somewhat derogatory term is widely used in Tai Chi circles and it refers to a problem with the stance that is fairly easily avoided in most cases.

If you stand on floorboards in a forward stance with the *outside* edge of your front foot lined up with the floorboards, you will notice that your knee position changes. Because feet are slightly triangular, your big toe will be pointing a little bit inwards and when you shift your weight into your front leg, your knee will turn in a little, giving it a bent appearance to anyone looking at you from the front. That’s “chicken leg” and it’s easily avoided by remembering that it’s the *inside* edge of the foot that should be lined up with the floorboards, big toe pointing forwards. If you find that your knee turns inwards even when your foot is in the correct position, don’t worry – we are all different. However you may find that regular practice of consciously but gently aligning your front knee in a forwards direction will gradually increase the strength of your thigh muscles until the correct position feels more natural.

Chicken leg can also occur during a roll-back when you sink into your back leg and turn your waist to deflect an opponent. It’s important to keep your front knee soft and facing in the direction of your toes (ie towards your opponent) and not allow it to twist inwards or to lock out straight.

5. How to hold your head high (and avoid turning turtle)

If your teacher has told you that you are leaning forwards, looking down or hunching your shoulders, and suggests that you keep your head up, it's natural just to leave your body as it is and try to lift your chin. Unfortunately, this leaves you with the same stooping posture but with your chin jutting out like a turtle, so instead:

Drop your tailbone

Just sit down a bit more, which straightens and lengthens your spine so that you can push your crown point up towards the ceiling, relax your shoulders and settle your spine into a

vertical alignment, with your chin in a neutral position and your eyes looking straight forward rather than down. This not only looks better, it's also better for your back, allows you to move more freely and helps you to let go of any tension you might have been carrying around with you.

You don't need to force your tailbone to tuck under to the point where you feel as if you're about to fall over backwards; just sink into your legs so that the lower part of your back settles downwards towards the floor.

Keep your back knee flexed

If you straighten your back leg and lock out the knee in your forward stances, it tends to make you lean forward and you won't be able to "sit down". Keeping the back knee soft allows you to drop the tailbone as described above and sink your weight into your legs. Dropping your tailbone not only corrects your posture by straightening your spine, it also allows you to move your waist freely.

In Tai Chi, if the waist doesn't move, nothing moves. For more waist flexibility, sink down a bit lower. When you sink, imagine sitting on an office chair and then lowering the seat position. This keeps the knees soft and natural and the posture erect and comfortable, (unlike making a conscious effort to bend the knees which, as we have seen, can result in tension, discomfort and poor posture).

Suspend the Crown Point

Tiny variations in the position of your head, such as looking down or lifting your chin a centimetre too high, can have a big effect on the position of the spine. When you look straight forward, as if the Crown Point is suspended from above by a piece of string, the spine finds its natural alignment and allows the vertebrae to move more freely. Just relax downwards and feel the freedom to turn your waist and tuck your tailbone under. If your back still feels a bit stiff, try adjusting the position of your chin slightly and relaxing down again, allowing your tailbone to drop towards the floor.

6. How to Breathe

In Tai Chi, we breathe as if the breath is coming all the way down to the lower abdomen; a region of the body known as the dantien, which is centred on a point inside you, about an inch below your navel.

The concept of “reverse breathing” or “Taoist breathing” will be mentioned in section 13 but for now it’s fine to just breathe normally and easily but, when you remember, imagine the air coming in through your nose and all the way down to the dantien region. When you breathe out, imagine the air leaving your body through your skin just below your navel.

Of course, your lungs only come down as far as your diaphragm, roughly level with your midriff or lower ribs, but the diaphragm displaces your internal organs a little so it feels as if you’re breathing into your tummy. And obviously the air isn’t really passing through your skin, it’s going up and out through your nose or mouth as normal but this visualization will help you to relax and move properly and will be very useful to you later on as you further develop your skills and understanding of Tai Chi.

7. How to hold a ball



In Tai Chi sequences, most of the movements are circular and the hands often assume a “hold the ball” position.

Remember to relax your arms and shoulders so that your elbow drops and rests on the imaginary ball, while the other hand supports it from underneath. Lifting the elbow puts a corner on the ball and causes stiffness in the arm, shoulder, neck and back whereas dropping the elbow, as if the weight of your arm is being supported by the invisible ball, allows all that tension to melt away.

8. How to lift an arm (“The raising of the wrist”)

With or without a pint of ale in your hand: to lift an arm, first lift the wrist. Imagine you’re a puppet with no strings attached to your elbow or shoulder and someone is pulling your wrist upwards with the only available piece of string.

When you move into a posture such as *White Crane Spreads Wings* or *Fair Ladies at Shuttles*, the arm stays floppy and loose and the shoulders stay relaxed so that the wrist and hand rise without involving the shoulder or elbow. In *White Crane* the effect is like cracking a whip; in *Fair Ladies* it’s like inflating a balloon and bouncing something off it.

If you find yourself wanting to lift your shoulder or elbow first, imagine having a heavy lead cloak draped around your shoulders and upper arms or even get someone to lightly press down on your upper arm as you lift your wrist to give you a feel for how it should move. The importance of this will become clearer later but it’s a good idea to get into this habit early on.

9. How to move forwards and backwards

Having taken the time to learn how to do a forward stance properly, the next step is to learn how to shift your weight forwards and backwards while standing in this position.

The trick is to imagine a straight line running forwards and backwards halfway between your feet and only move along this line without any side to side movement.

Just sit down into your stance and imagine someone pushing on your lower back so that you move forwards an inch or two and then you just push back a little into their imaginary hand so that you end up with a little more weight in your back leg than your front leg. You can also imagine sitting in an office chair with wheels on and rolling it backwards and forwards, using your thigh muscles to power and control the movement. This allows your back to remain straight, upright and relaxed, as if the chair is taking all your weight.

This is actually quite an easy thing to do and yet a surprising percentage of Tai Chi practitioners struggle with this one. It’s very common to see people moving diagonally from

one foot to the other and “throwing their hip out”, which is bad for their knees and very unhelpful for anyone wanting to use Tai Chi as a martial art as it leads to instability.

Why is this mistake so widespread? There are several reasons:

1. If you move forwards or backwards too far, you will naturally end up moving off the centre line and putting too much weight into your hip. It can also cause you to end up with your knee going forwards beyond your toes, which is very bad for your joints and your back. To avoid this, just take a more minimalist approach and aim to move an inch at a time.
2. Because, in a forward stance, your feet are placed at the diagonally opposite corners of an imaginary square, it's natural to assume that transferring your weight from one foot to the other involves shifting your weight diagonally.
3. In Tai Chi circles, people talk about one of the principles from the classics called avoiding “double-weightedness”. This expression can be interpreted in different ways. One meaning is that your weight does not remain stuck in one place, evenly distributed between both feet, for more than a fraction of a second. The reason for this is that you need to be able to move freely from a standing start to escape an incoming attack and this is easier if you have one leg light and ready to lift off the floor, whereas being equally rooted in both feet means that you have a “moment of inertia” to overcome first. This is sound advice but you are not double-weighted if your weight is constantly moving forwards or backwards, even if only by an inch in each direction, therefore you don't need to be moving from side to side as well.

Another interpretation of double-weightedness is having twice as much weight in one foot than you should, in other words going too far forwards or backwards and ending up throwing your hip out, which is what we were trying to avoid in the first place! So however you interpret the phrase, you'll be avoiding it by just moving forwards and backwards an inch or two, avoiding side to side movements or extremes.

So having told you not to move from side to side, we now look at...

10. How to move sideways

No I'm not contradicting myself. I was talking so far about avoiding side to side movements in forward stances. Now I'm referring to actual sideways Tai Chi stepping in movements such as *waving hands in clouds*, sometimes called *cloud hands* or *cloud arms*.

In this movement you take a step sideways, usually shoulder-width or sometimes wider, and then bring the other foot in; all the way, half-way or even crossing one foot behind the other, depending on which style you are doing. The real skill is in sinking down with your knees soft, keeping your head at the same level so that you don't bob up and down, and transferring your weight slowly and smoothly from one foot to the other without any jerkiness.

Use the power in your thighs to control the stepping until it becomes very precise and even. Turn from the waist as you go so that as your arms rise and fall in front of your centre line they appear to move in circles.

11. How to uproot a wall

To give you some idea of the power available in Tai Chi, try the following experiment.

Stand facing a brick or concrete wall (not the flimsy plasterboard or wooden type or you might do it some damage!)

Take a shoulder-width forward stance with the toes of your front foot touching the wall.

Place your hands on the wall in front of you, directly in front of your heart.

Experiment 1 – Now push on the wall and as you push, breathe in. This will probably feel very odd, as if you are trying to suck the wall towards you.

Experiment 2 – Now push on the wall again, this time breathing out as you push. This will probably feel much stronger and reassure you that your body knows how to breathe when you push something.

Experiment 3 – Now take a deep breath, place your hands an inch or two lower on the wall and then, as you breathe out, sink down further into your legs and tuck your tailbone under a little. Imagine that you are trying to lift the wall up off its foundations using the heels of your palms. Keep both your knees softly bent and avoid locking the back leg out straight. As you breathe out, make the sound “Hwaa” which has a helpful effect on the way your muscles work as you tuck your pelvis under and transfer energy from the dantien (lower abdomen) through your arms and into the wall.

How did that feel? Could you feel the power available to you from pushing in this way?

In Tai Chi, to knock someone over, we aim to break their root with the floor rather than push horizontally against them, which they may be able to resist quite easily. Even if you are not interested in this aspect, you will gain considerable benefits from breathing and moving in this way. These benefits include improved balance and core stability and greater precision in anything that needs a steady hand, from painting and calligraphy to brain surgery. It can help to improve your golf swing, skiing or horse-riding and can even be useful during childbirth!

12. How to grow “roots”

Imagine a huge weight pressing you down into your legs and roots growing from the soles of your feet into the earth, making it impossible for anyone to move you.

Unless you are about to step or change direction, keep your feet flat on the floor as if you are stuck there with superglue. If you are just moving backwards and forwards (as in ward-off, roll-back, press and push) avoid lifting your heel as you move forwards or lifting your toes as you move backwards as either of these will make it very easy for an opponent to uproot and unbalance you. Just use your thigh muscles to shift your weight forwards and backwards while your feet stay flat on the floor.

How to take an “empty stance”

There are some Tai Chi postures, such as White Crane Spreads Wings or Play Guitar (Strum the Lute), in which your weight settles mostly into your back leg and you very lightly rest the toe or heel of your front foot on the floor without putting any weight into it. In this position, the front foot is like a stabiliser for balance and it would be very easy to lift that foot and kick with it because you are firmly rooted into your back leg. Keep the front knee soft and avoid “locking it out”.

13. How to “Feel Your Chi.”

This is a controversial subject and I have explored it in the booklet: “Qigong: Sense, Common Sense and Nonsense,” which is available as a free PDF download from my website:

www.taichileeds.com/qigong.

Briefly, there is a widely-held belief in the Far East that the body is pervaded by a subtle energy which goes by various names. In India it is called *Prana*, in Japan it is called *Ki* and in China it is called *Chi*. It is believed to be the life-force which animates the body, flowing through channels called “meridians”.

It’s often difficult for people born in the West, especially those with any kind of scientific training, to accept that this mysterious energy might actually exist. However, many Westerners do go along to Acupuncturists, who use needles to unblock the flow of Chi, since “stagnant Chi” is believed to cause illness.

Whatever your thoughts about the existence or otherwise of Chi, I would like to suggest here that it’s a useful idea to have in your mind because visualizing the flow of energy through your body can improve your Tai Chi immensely.

It can do this in several ways:

1. ***Holding the ball*** – When you “hold the ball” you can visualize holding a ball of light or energy. It doesn’t matter what colour you imagine it to be – white, silver, gold, multi-coloured and sparkly or shimmery or ghostly or transparent – as long as you imagine it’s there in your hands. You might even feel a kind of warmth, coolness or tingling in your palms and fingers as you roll, squash and stretch this imaginary ball! Your movements will become smoother as a result.



2. ***Rolling the dantien*** – You can imagine that a ball of chi fills the whole of your lower abdomen and as you breathe out you can roll this ball so that, as your tailbone drops, it rotates forward between your legs, rises up the front of your lower abdomen and tucks in below your ribs. This is called “rolling the dantien” and it’s an extremely useful visualization to have in mind when you want to uproot something and push it over (...a wall, a refrigerator or a would-be assailant). This is the basis of “reverse breathing” or “Taoist breathing”, which improves balance and gives you a steady hand and it therefore offers practical benefits in everything from Martial Arts to the fine arts and from snowboarding to brain surgery,

3. ***Feeling the flow*** – You can imagine energy from the dantien flowing though your limbs like water through a hosepipe. Your movements will then naturally become more rounded, fluid and powerful. The “water” can move softly in curves or spirals or it can surge through with the power of a pressure hose. Just as a hosepipe won’t work if it has kinks in it, Tai Chi doesn’t work if you have sharply bent elbows. Everything works in circles in Tai Chi.

How are you doing so far?

If you have worked carefully through this section you might have made some interesting discoveries and perhaps made a few adjustments. Before we go any further, you might like to take one more look, using the following summary as a checklist.

This position is a (Yang Style) “ward-off”. It illustrates some of the basic Tai Chi principles:

1. The spine is straight and upright and the tail bone is dropped.
2. The head is “suspended from above” and the gaze is level.
3. The feet are shoulder width apart, front foot pointing forwards, back foot turned to a comfortable angle.
4. Both knees are unlocked and the weight is sunk down into the legs.
5. The front knee does not project further forward than the toes and the body moves straight forwards and backwards without drifting from side to side.
6. In Tai Chi, the shoulders stay down and level and when an arm is raised the elbow normally remains lower than the wrist. The left arm forms a curve, as if holding a large ball of chi against the chest.



Following these basic principles in your Tai Chi forms makes your practice more enjoyable, gives you the benefits to your health and well-being that Tai Chi is renowned for and also provides the foundation for you to further develop your skills towards mastery.

Tai Chi Troubleshooting

If you have worked through the previous section, and made any necessary adjustments to your Tai Chi forms, it's likely that you will read this section with a feeling of "Well duh!" That's because you will probably be starting to see that the whole art is based on just a few basic principles and everything follows from these.

Think of this section as a kind of revision summary if you like. It lists the twelve inadvertent mistakes that crop up again and again, even when people have been practicing Tai Chi for many years.

Some students may become very frustrated that they have not "got it" yet. Even so, they may still be very resistant to any suggestions to correct these basic misunderstandings. This is not necessarily due to an unwillingness to cooperate; we all become very attached to our own way of doing things, and habits can be tricky to unlearn unless we have the determination to bring them under our conscious attention and control until the correct version becomes habitual instead.

It's also very interesting to know that we only process about one tenth of the information in front of us and we fill in the gaps with our own expectations. This is how magicians can get you to see a ball being thrown up in the air when it was actually still in their hand! It's also why eye witnesses often give very different accounts of the same event. I recently discovered two students clapping their hands under their legs during a kick. Everyone else was doing a sweeping, circular kick and slapping the side of the foot with the hand but these ladies had heard the slap and, in their mind's eye, seen it as clapping of the hands and they insisted that's what everyone else was doing!

When we misinterpret what is happening in this way, we can be very sure that we are right and it's very difficult for anyone to convince us otherwise, even the teacher who taught us in the first place. It can therefore take great courage and an open mind to ask ourselves, with all honesty, if we are really doing what the teacher is doing.

Twelve common Tai Chi errors – and how to avoid them.

1. ***Narrow stances*** – as if you are walking a tightrope, especially in ward off position. This leads to loss of balance, instability and an inability to use the waist and dantien effectively. It only takes a little more effort to step out diagonally into a shoulder-width stance, as if your feet are on parallel train tracks, but the rewards you reap from doing it are quite profound.

2. ***Chicken leg*** – allowing the knee to collapse inwards due to turning in the toes of the front foot. In forward stances, the toes point forwards towards an opponent but, because of the roughly triangular shape of the foot, it needs to be the big toe, or the inside edge of the foot, that is pointing forwards, otherwise, as you transfer your weight into the front leg, the knee bends inwards. Keep the front knee in that same forward direction when performing a roll-back. This structure keeps the hip joint open and is sometimes called “opening the kwa”.

3. ***Throwing the hip out*** – moving diagonally from hip to hip rather than forwards and backwards. This makes the posture unstable, the weight being over-committed into one leg, and prevents you from using the waist and dantien effectively. Apart from having less power in your movements, you are also more likely to be pushed or pulled over in a fight.

4. ***Straight legs*** – either one or both legs locked out straight during some or all of the sequence. This prevents correct use of the waist and dantien, makes it difficult to change direction or issue any power and can lead to loss of balance and even injury.

5. ***Stiffening the thumb joint*** – it seems like only a little thing, but squeezing in the thumb alongside a flat hand creates tension not only in the hand and arm but throughout the rest of the body and interferes with the fluidity of the movements. The area between the thumb and hand should be open and relaxed and the palm slightly hollow.

6. ***Raising the shoulders and/or elbows*** – lifting one or both shoulders or elbows or using the shoulder muscles to lift the arm. In Tai Chi the shoulders relax and just go along for the ride. If an arm is raised, it rises from the wrist, with the rest of the arm dangling. Using the shoulders or lifting the elbows creates tension and stiffness and interferes with the smooth, connected, whole body flow.

7. *Leaning in any direction* – Tai Chi works from a central axis (the spine) which needs to be free to turn. Leaning interferes with balance and the ability of the spine to rotate freely at the waist. It also prevents you from dropping the tailbone and "rolling the dantien".

8. *Leaving the back foot turned out* – In forward stances, the back foot turns in to an angle of about 45 degrees or less. If it is left out at ninety degrees or more, it creates a twist on the ankle, knee and hip joints that can easily result in injury. Whenever your waist turns you towards a new direction let the back toes follow while your heel rests on the floor.

9. *Not using the waist* – In Tai Chi, if the waist doesn't move, nothing moves. Trying to turn out a foot without allowing the waist to lead it is awkward and puts a strain on the hip, knee and ankle joints.

10. *Looking up or down* – The most fundamental Tai Chi principle is the suspending of the crown point, which is another way of saying "look straight ahead". It might seem a little thing but if you are forever looking down at your feet or hands to check where you are putting them, or looking up at the ceiling, this will affect the flexibility of your spine so that your waist and dantien will not be free to move properly.

11. *Trying too hard to "do it"* – which leads to tension, stiffness and the mind interfering with the experience and expression of the form. Once you have trained and mastered a movement, you can switch from thinking to feeling and allow it to flow naturally rather than forcing it.

12. *Going too low* – this error is more common among experienced students than beginners and is often seen in YouTube clips in which youngsters show off their gymnastic ability by performing their Tai Chi with their bottoms almost touching the ground and their knees bending as if they are made of rubber. Usually this is accompanied by locked out back legs, bottoms sticking out, arched backs, leaning forwards, knees extended beyond the toes and back heels sliding out, leading to instability, loss of internal power and possible injury to joints. It might look good in a demonstration but it's martial value is highly questionable and, since it's not following the Tai Chi principles, it's not, strictly speaking, Tai Chi.

Going Exploring

In this section you'll find various tips, insights and exercises to help you to begin to explore Tai Chi in even more depth. Learning Tai Chi is a bit like peeling the layers off an onion and there are always more layers to uncover. That's what makes it so fascinating. You can study it for a whole lifetime and still be making new discoveries. A recent study³ found that elderly people who practiced Tai Chi three times a week experienced improved memory and their brains actually grew! So don't be put off by the fact that there's a lot to learn in Tai Chi, just enjoy the gradual process of discovery!

What shape is your form?

Think about a Tai Chi sequence you have learned so far. How much space does it take up on the floor? Is there enough room to practice a whole form in your kitchen, living room or garden? In a room that is big enough, where would be the best place to stand so that you could fit it all in?

When you start your form, do you have a kind of mental floor map in mind so that you know where you are going? Is the whole thing linear, going off to your left and back again a few times and ending up back where you started? Does it form a large rectangle because of all the stepping out into shoulder-width stances? Do you finish in the same place you started or somewhere else?

I am always surprised when students stand near a wall that runs right through the ground map of their form so that they either run out of space half way through and have to take a few steps backwards or end up with very narrow stances because the wall prevents them from stepping out to shoulder width.

One way to prevent this is to imagine doing your Tai Chi on a beach. What pattern would your footprints leave in the sand? How big an area would the pattern cover and where would it be, with respect to your starting position? You might like to try this next time you visit a beach.

Once you have the overall shape and size of the foot map in mind, you can mentally lay it down wherever you go.

The map is related to the position of your own body, not to the room. We have known students who can only do their Tai Chi in a particular room, aligning themselves with a radiator that is in a certain place, and they are lost if they have to do it outside, facing in a different direction or even standing in a different position among a group of their fellow students. When the form is in *you* rather than in the room, it is there whenever you want it. You can practice it wherever you go in the world, for the rest of your life.

So how do you remember forms?

How do you remember your forms? When I have asked my students this question, the answers have included all kinds of methods from memorizing a written list to always following someone else and therefore never actually learning it at all.

We heard of a couple who spent a hefty chunk of their life savings on a trip to China in order to learn Tai Chi so that they could come back and teach it. After many months of daily study with a master, they came back and were horrified to discover that they didn't remember any of it because they had always copied the teacher and never practiced on their own.

Having a go by yourself is an essential stage of learning. It allows your teacher to give you a gift for life rather than just a weekly recreation class.

In my case, as well as the ground-map, I have a three-dimensional awareness; a bit like a hologram spread out in space. It's quite vague and fuzzy, more of a feeling than a visual image, no fine detail, but the overall shape and dimensions of the whole form are kind of there around me before I start and the detail opens up as I get to it, like the fine twists and turns of a path travelled many times. At the close of a Tai Chi sequence with a group, I feel that we have been on a great journey together.

All fingers and thumbs!



You may have done this experiment in class but if not, have a go now. Hold your arm out in front of you with your hand outstretched, palm down and very relaxed, as if it's resting on a cushion. As it really relaxes, watch how your thumb sinks down into the imaginary cushion.

Now lift your thumb so it's level with the rest of your hand. Does it still feel as relaxed as it did a moment ago? If not, where are you feeling the tension?

In your hand?

In your arm?

In your shoulder?

In your back?

In your legs?



Now let the thumb drop and feel everything relax again. It's amazing how the position of your thumbs can alter the experience and appearance of a whole Tai Chi form. Some people deliberately try to keep their thumb level with the hand throughout, and their forms become stiff and awkward as a result. The logic is that it protects the thumb from being bent back during a strike, but actually, if you hit something in the right way, the position of a relaxed thumb won't be a problem because you are actually striking with the base and side of your palm, not a flat hand, and the extra power generated from a relaxed body increases the power available. (This only applies to thumbs! Little fingers are another matter entirely and it's best not to leave them waving around to get broken.)

As to the rest of your fingers, relaxed doesn't mean limp and floppy and strong doesn't mean hard and stiff as a shovel. There's a third state that is neither floppy nor tense, a kind of stretched elasticity which allows power to be expressed without sacrificing sensitivity and connectedness. Water is soft, but when it surges through a flexible pressure hose it can do a pretty good job of cleaning your drive and there are probably few people who would choose to stand in its way!

You can do it with your eyes closed.

If you have a large enough safe space with a flat floor (nothing to trip over or bump into etc.) you might like to try doing a bit of your Tai Chi form with your eyes closed or partly closed. If it all works well and you enjoy the experience, fine. However, if you find yourself struggling to keep your balance, this can give you some useful feedback. Loss of balance is usually due to one or more of the following:

1. *Straight legs*. If your knees are locked out straight it's very difficult to keep your balance and it leads to lots of other problems. Your knees need to be soft and “give” a little.
2. *Narrow stances*. If one foot is directly in front of the other, it's like walking on a tightrope across the Grand Canyon. Few people can do that, even with their eyes open!
3. *Incorrect foot positions* which put a strain on the leg joints and cause leaning or wobbling (such as leaving the rear foot at right angles to the front foot instead of turning the toes in to a comfortable angle).
4. *Incorrect timing*, such as trying to turn a foot while your weight is still on it or trying to turn out a foot before the waist moves that way.

Any one of the above is likely to cause one or more of the others, eg. leaving the foot out tends to cause straight legs and narrow stances and may also mess up your timing.

When you have tried doing Tai Chi with your eyes closed, all of this becomes self-evident. Instead of just following your teacher's instructions in order to keep him or her happy, you will find yourself sinking down, stepping out at shoulder width, remembering to put your feet in all the right places and transferring your weight at the right time, just to avoid falling over!

In effect, by listening to your own body, you become your own master. This is one of the reasons why Tai Chi is known as an internal martial art.

Having said all that, it's not a good idea to do Tai Chi with your eyes closed in class, unless you're only there for company and not really interested in copying what the teacher is doing. There are a few students who never seem to improve because they always have their eyes closed and never look at the teacher to check whether or not they are doing it properly! Then again, they seem to be happy enough...

Remember the Square and the Circle

In Tai Chi, everything works in circles but it is easy to get so caught up in the spiraling grace of the movements that we neglect the structure: postures, stances, rooting etc. (explained in detail in section one) so the whole thing becomes floaty and waffly and loses its power and effectiveness as a fighting art and the stability required for maximum health benefits.

On the other hand, if all the attention is focused on structure (the square), we may have a very technically correct, precise form but it looks stiff and jerky, like a wooden wheel with corners on it, and our Tai Chi becomes almost robotic.

The trick is to find the balance between the square and the circle, flowing seamlessly from one well-structured posture to the next so that no one can see the join; like the yin and yang "fishes" in the circle. That's where the skill comes in and also where the joy is to be found. And that's what makes it Tai Chi.



Even the mosquito finds nowhere to land

If you have ever been led around a room with your eyes closed, guided by just the tip of your finger – a common exercise in Tai Chi classes – you will have discovered the amazing power of the sense of touch.

If you have never done it before, you might like to try it with a willing partner. You just need some clear floor space.

Here's how to do it:

- Stand facing your partner.
- Both of you hold out a hand and make contact with just the pad at the end of your index or middle finger.
- Ask your partner to close his or her eyes and follow you around the room. You can lift or lower your arm as you go and carefully change direction at will.
- Walk around the room and let your partner follow you, fingers still touching.
- After a minute or so, swap roles and let your partner lead you.

How did it feel to lead your partner? Did you feel quite responsible for their safety?

How did it feel to be led? Did you trust your partner to look after you? Did you feel as if that bit of your finger was the most substantial thing in the world?

Were you surprised how easy it was to stay connected, finger-to finger?

- Now repeat the exercise but, this time, both of you **keep your eyes open** the whole time.

You may have noticed how much harder the exercise becomes if you try to do it with your eyes open. There is a reason for this. Sight is usually the dominant sense and when we can see what's going on around us, the rational brain rolls up its sleeves and gets to work "helping" or, perhaps more accurately, "interfering". Suddenly the alertness and sensitivity take a back seat and you are into the business of trying to predict your partner's every move or maybe taking over the leading process altogether, causing you to break finger-contact.

You might think that using your eyes would make the process easier. In theory it should, since you have more information available, but in practice, the rational mind messes things up and diverts the attention to visual images and away from other sensory input. You may have heard of the blind man who can cycle through woods using echo-location from verbal clicking sounds he makes, in much the same way that bats do. Most of us have been fortunate enough never to need to discover this ability but it's a good example of what we are capable of if we pay more attention to what our other senses are telling us.

Rational thought processes are slow. Feelings and instincts are faster. When you are fully present in the moment, posture "balanced like a scale", relaxed and upright, weight sunk down, alert and sensitive so that, as it says in the Tai Chi classics¹, even a mosquito landing on you would not go unnoticed; you can respond instantly to your situation.

In a fight, as soon as you make contact with an opponent you can sense so much about their intentions and capabilities through your sense of touch. It's a large part of what Bruce Lee called "being aware of your opponent's whole energy." It's faster and more reliable than trying to predict their every move and plan your tactics rationally. This level of sensitivity and awareness leads to that other saying from the classics: "My opponent moves a little, I have moved first".

In your forms, this level of sensitivity makes it feel as if you are sensing every molecule of the air around you with your fingertips, which become like the wing-tip feathers of a bird. In this way you can experience what the classics call being "like the eagle gliding serenely on the wind but alert and ready in an instant to dive down and pluck a rabbit from the ground". OK so let's not be unkind to rabbits, but it's still a great feeling!

Speed is of the essence!

Do you have a preferred speed for doing your Tai Chi form? Left to your own devices without the need to keep up with the pace of a group, do you rattle through it like a steam train or slow it down so much that you barely seem to be moving? Or do you have a fair-to-middling rhythmic pace that you always like to go at and you feel uncomfortable if you have to change it for any reason?

Maybe there's a particular piece of music that you always like to do it to and you go with the tempo of that. Maybe there are times when you get impatient with the teacher or the rest of the class because they are going "too slow", or they leave you behind while you do your own thing with your eyes closed and let them wait for you at the end.

No? That's OK. Yes? That's OK too. Maybe your inner nature likes to express itself at a particular speed. Maybe that's just what you feel most comfortable with. And of course there's also the possibility that, if you were to try it a little quicker sometimes, or a little slower at other times, you might discover some new things that could be very interesting.

For example, when you are going very, very slowly, you can take your time to notice the precision and timing of the movements... and the way that the breathing... naturally... slows down too... the way each movement transforms... so effortlessly... into the next...like a quiet river on a calm day... with barely a ripple on the surface... yet so smooth and so...so deep.....

And when you speed it right up until the movements flow instinctively with no time for thought yet still so precise and so powerful, like a dragon breaking free from the mud at the bottom of a lake, surging through the water and bursting upwards into the sky; alert and alive and ready for whatever presents itself in that moment...Ahhhh!

Fascinating isn't it? And of course, as always, the real freedom is in the choice.

Why is Tai Chi so Slow? – Part 1: It Isn't!

You can do Tai Chi at any speed you like, including very fast and very slow, but if you always do it fast from the beginning, you never develop precision and internal power and you run the risk of injury.

Tai Chi is normally taught to beginners at a fairly slow pace and, as their skill level increases, they learn to slow it down even more, allowing the breathing to settle down with it. At a slow speed there is more internal awareness and the opportunity for greater attention to detail. If you are unbalanced or have left a foot behind on a turn, you know about it and have time to correct it. If there is tension anywhere, you have time to notice it and allow it to fall away.

If you are rushing through a form, on the other hand, a dodgy movement passes so quickly that you may not even be aware of it; aching knees later on may be the only indication that there was something not quite right about your movements. Your forms will look sloppy and uncoordinated and it's very likely that you will develop all sorts of bad habits that are difficult to correct later on.

When you are going at speed, you don't have time to notice everything the teacher is doing. It's easy to become mesmerised by the most obvious thing – the hand movements. The footwork and posture are actually far more important but are more difficult to notice when you are moving quickly.

If you are going so fast that you regularly leave the teacher behind, you won't be noticing what the teacher is doing at all. If you want to get your money's worth from your lesson, then slowing down and watching the teacher like a hawk tends to be a cost-effective strategy.

Whether or not you want to become a Tai Chi champion, doing Tai Chi as a social activity is great once a week but if you take the time to do it slowly and learn it properly, you end up with a gift for life which you can practice safely, enjoy whenever you choose to and perhaps even pass on to the next generation.

Once the Tai Chi principles become your default way of moving, you can then speed up until you can respond like lightning without losing your balance or damaging your joints in the process. As well as improving the odds of your survival if the need arose to protect yourself, this level of skill can help to prevent falls in later life and contribute to your health, mobility and quality of life – a good return, perhaps, from your investment of that little bit of extra time in the now.

Why is Tai Chi so slow? – Part 2: Internal Power

In the Internal Martial arts, the main objective is to cultivate internal power instead of muscular strength and to train the body to be very relaxed yet resilient, like a rubber ball.

By always training fast, our movements can become sloppy and less coordinated; by training the body slowly and precisely, using all the principles previously mentioned in this guide, we cultivate an internal awareness and develop our skills to a high level.

We learn to control the breathing and use minimal effort to exert a maximum force, drawing upon power from the whole body rather than just an arm or leg. We conserve energy and use it only when it is needed.

We also train the mind to be calm and steady, fully present in the moment, rather than being over-aroused or distracted. In a challenging situation we are then more likely to remain peaceful, in control and able to take a wider view of the situation rather than reacting blindly through anger or being paralyzed by fear.

By training slowly, aware of our posture, balance and breathing, our movements become spontaneous and free. Our relaxed hands are sensitive and we can access the full potential of our hidden, internal power.

Why is Tai Chi so slow? – Part 3: Mindfulness

Tai Chi is a natural way of transforming "doing" into "being" and "experiencing". For some people, this can have a profound effect on their lives.

When we enter a Tai Chi class, we leave our everyday concerns at the door. As we study and practice the complex movements of the form, there is no time to worry about the past or fret about the future; we are just here, in the moment.

As beginners, we have to focus very hard on how to do each movement properly, but as we repeat the movements over and over, just like learning to ride a bike or learning to drive or swim, the need to think about them, or to "do" anything in particular, gradually fades away and we can simply rest in the now, experiencing each moment fully, the movements becoming more of an expression of our inner nature than a routine to "perform".

For anyone feeling caught up in the hectic pace of modern living – rushing here and rushing there, doing this and doing that, trying their best to plan, control and fix everything, including any perceived character flaws or unwelcome feelings – just letting go of all of this can be such a relief! It can lift anxiety and depression and allow a sense of contentment and wonder to develop instead, almost as if we are looking at the world for the first time; experiencing it fully with all our senses.

Slowing down can be a challenge at first for some people; they try to learn the sequence as fast as possible, do it and get it over with as quickly as they can and then move on to something else. A high percentage of beginners don't come back after the first lesson because it's "too slow" and they really wanted something "more aerobic". It's a shame really because these are often the very people who would benefit from it the most.

For those who stick with it and begin to slow down, some interesting things can begin to happen. They frequently report that they are sleeping better, feeling happier and are less irritable with their families and work colleagues. They feel more calm and "centred" or "grounded" and can allow their Tai Chi skills to develop naturally, the way a flower opens up in the sunshine: slowly and perfectly.

Rushing through Tai Chi forms, you can miss so much. With a little patience and willingness to settle down to a speed more in tune with the natural flow of life; you can experience the sheer joy of movement and stillness and appreciate the miracle of this present moment.

And it's not only in class or when practicing Tai Chi by yourself that you can experience life more fully by simply slowing down; every moment is equally precious, whether feeling the rain on your skin, tasting what you are eating, listening to birdsong, witnessing a sunset, smelling the fragrance of honeysuckle on the evening air or holding the hand of a loved one.

Change is inevitable: we can't hold onto life's peak experiences, but we can appreciate them as they unfold in this moment and we can make it less likely that, like the butterfly hunter speeding up the motorway, we will miss them altogether as we rush on past. At the speed of life, every moment can be a peak experience.

Why is Tai Chi so fast? – Because it's so slow!

Having learned a sequence slowly and carefully – developing precision, power, breath control, timing, co-ordination, sensitivity and all the rest of it – you can gradually build up speed so that you can become fast and explosive if you wish to.

Doing it at speed also provides a good workout, providing you are doing it correctly and safely, incorporating all the basic principles that you set as default while you were practicing it slowly.

Another reason why doing it quickly from time to time can be useful is that it encourages fluidity. It doesn't give you time to think or to hesitate, you just flow on through, and this is fine as long as you are still moving properly and not getting sloppy or developing bad habits.

A bit of speed occasionally can get people through the "robotic" stage; the stopping and starting that occurs when you first learn to string together the various postures and movements of the form.

At this stage it's easy to get mesmerised by the habitual rhythm of "doing this posture" then "doing that posture" so that the whole thing develops a kind of jerkiness. This can sometimes be hard to smooth out while you are still going slowly but the jerkiness melts away when you practice the form at speed. The sharp edges start to blur and become more circular and you begin to surge like a river rather than plod along like a cart with square wheels.

You begin to realize that in any Tai Chi sequence there is just one continuous movement which arises from the stillness of Wu Chi at the beginning of the form, flows continuously through the interplay of yin and yang, then settles back into Wu Chi as the mind and body come fully to rest after the final bow.

Paradoxically, older students and people with arthritis tend to find that it is actually more comfortable and easier to move at a slightly faster speed because the momentum carries them through and they don't have to spend too much time on either leg. This is fine, as long as they are doing the movements correctly and safely so that they don't injure joints in the process.

Like most things in Tai Chi, it's all a matter of balance; yin and yang. Some days, you might practice slowly, other days you might experiment with high speed Tai Chi and fa jing (explosive movements) in order to explore your power and fluidity, then slow it back down again, maintaining that same fluidity while fully experiencing the connectedness and control and the vast reservoir of power within you.

In the end, it's because you practice slowly some of the time that you are able to practice it at high speed without becoming sloppy. And it's because you practice fast sometimes that you are able to appreciate fluidity and power and retain these when you practice slowly.

The point of these discussions is to avoid becoming too attached to your own preferred speed, just because that's the speed that your teacher always did it or because it's the speed of the music you normally practice to.

As a master of Tai Chi, you are free to move at any speed you choose, allowing you to respond appropriately in any situation.

If you practice to music then, whatever music is playing, you can choose the rhythm you respond to; the obvious one, or perhaps moving twice as fast; or discovering a deeper, slower pulse that you move to as the extra notes wash over you, like wind-blown ripples on the surface of the deep swell of the sea.

Studying the Tai Chi Classics

In this guide, you have heard a lot about the Tai Chi principles which have been handed down for centuries in China, verbally and in written documents known as the Tai Chi Classics¹. The earliest and most famous of these is the Treatise of Master Chang San-Feng which is thought to originate from the 12th century. The other major Tai Chi Classics are the Treatises by Master Wang Tsung-Yueh and Master Wu Yu-Xiang.

These masters passed on a gift to us by explaining the art of Tai Chi in the form of a series of striking metaphors. Tai Chi involves some very subtle skills and qualities which are extremely difficult to put into words or to understand intellectually with our logical, left-brain reasoning. The right hemisphere of the brain, however, absorbs concepts intuitively and therefore some complex aspects of the art can be absorbed on a very deep level by just hearing a description that works for you.

Whether you think of Tai Chi as "flowing like a river" or "an ocean rolling ceaselessly", or "connected like a string of pearls", you can gain a sense of the smoothness and whole-body power available when you practice Tai Chi.

Whether you become like "an eagle gliding serenely on the wind" or a person upon whom "even the mosquito finds nowhere to land", you will gradually become aware of an increased sensitivity and responsiveness.

You will learn to stand with your posture "balanced like a scale" and to move with the controlled power and alertness of "the placid cat, ready to pounce on the scurrying mouse" and you will develop the resilience and elasticity of "an accordion, folding and unfolding."

The classics will be most helpful to you if you read them many times while continuing to practice Tai Chi regularly, even if you don't understand them at first. Odd phrases will stick in your mind or pop into your head occasionally while you are practicing your forms.

At first these sayings will probably make you scratch your head and wonder what they are talking about but, as your skills increase, some of them will begin to make more and more sense to you until eventually you will feel that they are so obvious that you could have written them yourself, because they simply describe what is within you.

A would-be pianist can't learn to play the piano by reading lots of sheet music and never touching a piano, but a combination of studying sheet music and regular practice at the keyboard can allow the development of a great pianist, especially if a good teacher is around to correct any errors and offer advice. It's the same with Tai Chi. You can't master it just by reading the classics or by copying forms but if you have a good teacher and you practice the sequences patiently while also studying the classics and thinking deeply about them, this combination can eventually lead you to mastery.

So it's a martial art then?

If you want to reach a high level in Tai Chi and maybe teach it to other people, whether or not you are interested in self-protection or fighting competitions, you will eventually need to learn how to apply the movements of the form and develop some skill in push hands.

The following are the main *Tai Chi principles relating to push hands and combat*:

1. Never meet force with force, always yield to an incoming attack.
2. Stick to your opponent.
3. Use his incoming movement to your advantage to unbalance him.
4. Redirect his movement by deflecting him past you or off to the side, (turn your waist).
5. If he tries to get away, follow. Allow him no escape.
6. To knock your opponent over, direct your power upwards, to uproot him.
7. Never leave your centre line (face, heart, groin) unguarded.
8. Look for “doors and windows” (exposed areas of your opponent’s body where a strike would be effective).
9. Be aware of every direction, in front, behind, right, left, all four diagonals, above, below and your centre.
10. Practice ward-off, roll-back, press, push, split, pluck, elbow-strike, shoulder-strike.

The martial aspects of Tai Chi can be explored by studying more advanced guides and videos, preferably under the instruction of a competent teacher, with suitable training partners available for regular practice to help you to develop your practical combat skills.

Where can you go from here?

The answer to this question will depend on many things.

1. Which aspects of Tai Chi you are interested in.
2. How much time you are willing to devote to your Tai Chi practice.
3. Your own capabilities.

Some people have a certain amount of natural talent or aptitude for Tai Chi but lack the patience or interest to take it further, while others who really struggle with the co-ordination or have physical challenges to overcome may, through their own determination and effort over a long period of time, reach a high level. While it's important to be realistic, Tai Chi is a type of Gongfu (Kung Fu) which means that, in general, the more you put in, the more you get out.

You might be interested in training for competitions, learning to protect yourself or even becoming a Tai Chi Instructor, or you may choose to just practice what you are doing for your own enjoyment for many years to come.

It is likely that, with regular practice, your skills and enjoyment will continue to increase and you might find that reading the Tai Chi Classics and other books on Tai Chi will help to deepen that enjoyment further still.

Whichever way you choose to go from here, I hope that you are now confident that your Tai Chi foundations are secure – your movements follow the ancient Tai Chi principles and you can practice them comfortably and safely. Wherever you go in the world, you can recognise good Tai Chi when you see it, other Tai Chi practitioners can recognise what you are doing as authentic Tai Chi and, whatever style you practice, you can feel part of the global “Tai Chi family”.

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www.taichileeds.com

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