

Elements of T'ai Chi Ch'uan Training

The essential elements of the T'ai Chi Ch'uan training are sequence, placement, alignment, body mechanics and movement principles. These aspects of the training are very detailed and precise, but they are not arbitrary. They have been developed over centuries, and are integral to the study of movement from the standpoint of this art.

Sequence: This refers to the chain of individual postures which make up the exercise form. They flow continuously from the beginning to the end. It also refers to the sequence of movement components within each individual posture. This inner sequence is very important; it insures that the motion of the body flows harmoniously and with synchronicity, in a fluid wave like manner. If the inner sequencing is incorrect, the body will not move properly. The joints will jam, and the internal and external directions of ones energy and intent will be in conflict.

Placement: Placement refers to where the feet and hands are in relation to each other, and to their relative angles and intensity to each other within the geometric space one occupies within any particular posture. It also refers to the position of the hands and feet in their relation to the body's vertical alignment, and major paired joints – hips and shoulders, knees and elbows, ankles and wrists. The stepping and weight shifting methods are key factors within this element. They are one of the sources of locomotion in the T'ai Chi exercise, and are the first things that are learned after the standing posture.

Correct placement of the body's sections in relation to each other creates a balanced body proportion, which makes one more comfortable when maintaining a still posture. It also confers a greater efficiency and ease of mechanical movement.

Alignment: There are three major alignment configurations. The first is the maintenance of an erect spine (plumb erect) through the relationship of the body's three primary centers. These are located at 1.5 in. below the navel (the Tan Tien), behind the sternum (the heart point), and in the head between the eyebrows. This vertical alignment allows the weight of gravity to pass unhindered throughout the body, and is the source of grounding and rooting. Grounding does not result from pressing oneself down into the ground, but from allowing the force of gravity to flow through and around the body so that it can accumulate under ones feet. This force then rebounds, rising up through the body along the line of the vertical spinal alignment. This transforms the force of gravity into a continuous convection current which both roots and uplifts. The rooted vertical alignment insures that there are no stress accumulations anywhere that would inhibit movement and function.

The second major alignment structure is the "4 corners". These are the shoulder and hip joints, and they align vertically, horizontally and diagonally. They constitute the perimeter of the inner circle, and are the gateway from the trunk of the body to the function of the arms and legs.

Amendment: *Some time in 2010, I felt something in the weight shifting that made me refer to the skeletal chart in an anatomy book. I saw that the shoulder joints were set wider than the hip joints, and that they were not aligned vertically in the central equilib-*

rium standing posture. I explored this in my training and it transformed how I shifted the weigh. This radically changed my overall approach to the exercise form and the self defense.

The correct alignment of these two primary structures establishes the “central equilibrium,” which is maintained throughout the performance of the solo exercise. It is also essential to the self-defense training. This allows one to be continuously centered, grounded and aligned while expressing varying modes and textures of movement in any direction. Central equilibrium guards against the error of “inclining,” or leaning the body’s alignment in any direction. Inclining inhibits proper breathing, as well as the internal and external body functions – it makes one unable to move.

The third alignment structure is delineated by the “five external points”; the top of the head, the palms of the two hands and the soles of the two feet. The “5 points” constitute the perimeter of the outer circle, and they are always related to, and aligned with the other two major alignment structures. The bones and joints of the arms and legs function and align as pairs – hips and shoulders, knees and elbows, ankles and wrists.

Note: Sequence, placement and alignment describe a more static and structural aspect of the T’ai Chi Ch’uan training. They form its foundation. A deeper understanding of the art will be dependent upon how proficient one becomes in these aspects.

The 2 following methods of body mechanics and movement principles are concerned with how one moves, while adhering to the fundamentals of sequence, placement and alignment.

Body Mechanics: The focus of this aspect of the training is to analyze and implement the most efficient mode of mechanical body movement. The joints of the body do not move by active muscular intent. The movement of the limbs is achieved through the folding and unfolding of the elbows and knees around the rotation of the shoulder and hip joints. This is true of both the arms and the legs. Movement functions by the synchronized folding, unfolding and rotation of the interrelated paired joints. Moving in this manner maintains the central equilibrium.

The physical and energetic movement of the T’ai Chi exercise proceeds in a wavelike manner, circulating through the body from location to location. The correct timing of the folding and unfolding of the joints of the limbs is important in accomplishing this. One should employ a syncopated rhythm.

Movement Principles: These principles give guidance to the practitioner. They provide an understanding of the essential nature of movement within the art of T’ai Chi Ch’uan. The movement principles are often expressed through imagery and metaphor from comparisons to the rhythms of nature.

One of the most important principles is that of the interrelated differentiation of yin and yang. Examples of yin and yang are yielding and firm, cold and hot, down and up, in and out, etc. It is this differentiation that makes motion possible. There are examples of this in nature. Water moves because of differences of elevation. Air becomes wind because of differences of temperature. Generation occurs because of differences of gender. The examples are limitless.

The principles of slow and relaxed movement encourage an openness of body and mind. This helps blood and air (chi) to circulate through the body with greater ease, increasing ones endurance. Movements that are tense and rapid can make one breathless and exhausted.

Another principle governs visual activity. The unification of the focal and peripheral visual fields allows one to maintain ones interior alignment within a larger and more dynamic field of activity. This is most clearly understood in the practice of self-defense because it is a partnered activity.

Some principles describe breathing rhythms and the coordination of stillness and motion. There are principles that describe the locations and timing of where movements gather, and from which they give expression. Other principles govern the coordination of the physical and mental activity.

The gravitational field establishes the vertical alignment. It is the grounding force. The union of gravity with the spark of impulse within oneself is the generative source of movement. All movement is essentially vertical, and the horizontal movements are the result of the folding and unfolding of the limbs around this vertical field. When the vertical and horizontal forces are set into motion within the spatial differentiation inherent within ones stance, the movement of the exercise becomes both circular (external) and rotating (interior).

One unites the in and out; and the up and down motions with the in and out breaths. With the correct timing and coordination of the movement of the arms and legs, the exercise form functions as a pump – a bellows, so that the exercise form moves and breathes itself. The unification of stillness and motion with the body and space creates movement that is self perpetuating – like that of the rhythms and cycles of nature, the seasons, the planetary motion.

© December 9, 2000 by Sam Slutsky.

