

Training notes.

The practice of tai chi is a fusion of mind, body and spirit. But learning tai chi can mean getting one thing right at a time. Our mind directs our body pretty much from the beginning but before it all comes together we need to get the body part right.

The basic principles of tai chi require softness and relaxation. Just getting these two things right can bring other things in play.

The problem I had when I first learned tai chi was that there was a lot of 'what' to do but very little 'how' to do it. So I am going to describe a few basic 'hows' in the hope that it will help in the, probably long, learning process.

Standing start: In the beginning there is 'wu ji'

Wu ji is the point from which it all starts. It is neutral, before yin and yang. It is zhang zhuang – standing like a tree.

Place your feet approximately shoulder width apart

Relax your feet (imagine that you have webbed feet like a duck) feel your weight sink into the floor

Move your hips back as though you are sitting on a high stool

Relax your head, down through your neck, shoulders, chest; relax your back so that your spine lengthens, relax your ribs and your pelvic girdle

Make sure that you keep your head upright

Stepping forward

The complication here is that to step properly you need to get your weight distribution (weighting) correct and that is a whole thing on its own.

In the beginning we talk about weighting being 70/30; that is to say that your weight bearing leg takes 70% of your weight and your neutral leg carries 30%.

So I will go with that for the time being

Standing in wu ji turn your right foot out to about 45 degrees from your forward-facing stance

Keeping your weight on your back leg – to do this move your weight slightly to the right so you are 'sitting' on your right hip – move your left leg forward so that your left heel is where your toe was

Move your weight forward onto your left leg. You should feel the weight come off of your right foot

Turn out your left foot and repeat

You can practise this stepping as an exercise. We call this 'dragon walking'

Getting your weighting right

This takes time and practice

In the beginning, while you are learning the form, 70/30 works fine but eventually you will discover that it is closer to 100/0!

You will need this distribution in order to maintain your stability through the transitional moves

The secret, I find, is to 'sit down'

Start from wu ji, remember? You move your hips back as though you are sitting on a high stool

From this position turn out one foot and move your hips over that leg. Do this until you feel the pressure come off of your other leg. You are now in a position to step, or to turn into a transitional move

This is something that it is not easy to teach. Like all of tai chi it is a matter of 'feeling', becoming 'body aware'

One of my teachers told me "I can only teach about half of this. The rest you have to learn for yourself." Probably the best advice anyone gave me about tai chi

Don't follow your hands

To the casual observer, and most beginners, tai chi is about the hand movements.

Beginners, maybe because of this, will often tend to follow their hand movements like someone learning to dance watches their feet

What can happen when you do this is that your body line also follows your hands and you end up leaning towards the position you are moving into, losing stability

So, lift your head by straightening your neck, sink your back (sit down!)

Move your WHOLE body and let that 'drive' your hands. Then you won't go far wrong.

Just five points but get them right and the whole of your practice will change and progress.