

Ticking all the boxes

When someone starts tai chi it is all a rush. They rush to learn the form, it is all about getting to the end. Their movements are also, probably, a bit quick. It is all about where their arms and hands should be never mind getting their feet in a tangle. The early days are all about memorising the moves; it becomes an intellectual exercise.

Move on a bit to when our student can stumble through the form without too many mistakes; now they are 'getting it'. But it is still all a bit hurried and someone who has been doing tai chi a bit longer than they have says something about how the form should 'flow'. So they actually speed up a bit and start to short-cut the moves; all to make it 'flow'. Or at least that is what they tell their teacher when asked what the hell they think they are doing?

So with practise and a bit of help our student gets to find out what it is about, is working on moving properly but is still, perhaps a bit quick so might still be missing bits of moves in a rush to get to the next one, still trying to make it 'flow'.

What to do? The short answer is 'slow down'. Remember the form is our training tool, of itself it is not the totality of tai chi. It is what we use to *learn* tai chi. Doing it slowly allows us to focus, not only on just getting our hand positions right but check what our feet are doing, how we are weighted. Remember the 80/20 rule: your standing leg supports your weight, your inactive leg is just resting on the floor (the theory being that your leg represents 80% of your total body weight).

Watching someone who knows what they are doing perform the tai chi form is like watching a swan gliding across a lake; above all is serene, what you can't see is what is going on under the water. The swan is paddling like crazy.

So it is with the tai chi form. It looks elegant, almost like a dance. What is not visible is how the practitioner is sinking internally, 'rooting' their feet, opening their joints, focusing intention on the horizon – or at least on the farthest point that they can see.

So, once you have worked out the movements, focus on what you are doing. When you make a move take a nano second to get a bit more to the end of it, feel your foot 'root' into the floor, check your balance and your weighting. It won't interrupt the 'flow', in reality you never stop moving; remember in tai chi we find 'movement in stillness' as well as 'stillness in movement'.

So take your time, focus on what you are doing, work it out: feel it! So your body, not your brain, will get the idea and if you ever did have to do it fast, in response, perhaps, to an aggressor, all the boxes will be ticked without you having to even think about it, it will 'flow' and, more importantly, work for you.