

How to Play Tai Chi

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Tai Chi is a martial arts. Each posture of the routine has its own martial arts background and function. But Tai Chi and many other styles of martial arts are different. The first difference is that Tai Chi movements are much slower. The second difference is that Tai Chi play must follow the Tai Chi principles. To play a fast moving martial arts routine in slow motion is not Tai Chi. To play a set of meaningless movements in slow motion is not Tai Chi either.

Many old Masters taught us these principles. One classical work by Yang Cheng Fu (1883 -1936) summarized ten fundamental principles for playing Tai Chi:

1. **Head straight:** Relax your neck and keep your head facing forward like it is hanging by a string from the top of your head at your Bai Hui point (acupuncture point D20). Your chin should be slightly downward.
2. **Body straight:** Keep your body straight. Do not bend your body forward or backward. Do not sway your body.
3. **Relax waist:** Your waist is the center of your body and the origin of your force and movements. Relaxing your waist will stimulate the Chi's movement and all parts of your body will be united as One.
4. **Distinguish the full and empty:** Shift your body weight as the posture requires. The leg that has your body weight is the "full" and the other leg is the "empty." Knowing the full and empty will make your movements balanced. Position changes will be effortless.
5. **Sink the shoulders and drop the elbows:** Relaxed shoulders and elbows will keep your Chi moving freely. Martial arts functions will be performed fluently with their intention. Raised shoulders or elbows will make your body stiff. Your arm and hand will not have the correct alignment for strike or defense. You will be injured by your own or your opponent's force in a real situation.
6. **Use the mind, not force:** Focusing on each posture's martial arts meaning without using actual physical force will lead you into moving meditation. A relaxed body will unite all your body parts as One.
7. **Harmony of the upper and lower body:** Under you belly button is the Dan Tian area where your Chi originates. Your Dan Tian (waist) executes the decision from your head and commands your body to move. Your relaxed waist will link your upper and lower body as One to perform your movement. Your legs and feet are the roots of your body. With a solid ground your force starts from your feet and reaches to your hands.
8. **Harmony of the internal and external:** Your mind and movement are synchronized. Your attention is concentrated at your strike zone area, but you are not staring at anything. Your internal mind focuses on your posture and is in harmony with your external movement. Body weight

shifting and body turning are synchronized with your breathing. Your breathing bridges your internal and external.

9. **Continuity and flow:** Play Tai Chi as though it were an artful play, like a drama on the stage. Each posture and its moving segments have their meanings. A Tai Chi routine/form from the beginning to the end is carried out by a continuation of waist (Dan Tian) movements without any interruption. As you learn to harmonize your mind and body movement, moving meditation will be achieved. A fast moving martial art uses explosive force; its postures move in an erupted fashion. Tai Chi's movements are slow and relaxed with unified precision like a flowing river.
10. **Seeking tranquility in movement:** In calm styles of meditation we use tranquility to tune out our active mind to reach the One. While playing Tai Chi we use the slow movement to tune out the active mind to achieve the One. In the slow movements we seek tranquility.

Li Yi Yu (1832 -1892), condensed the principles into five elements in his famous Five Word Rhyme:

1. **Quiet your heart:** If your heart is not quiet/calm, then you cannot be focused. You will lose your target. Use your quiet mind to follow your opponents (invisible during your play or physical during a confrontation). Sense the direction of the movement and the magnitude of the force. Stick with your opponents and be in control.
2. **Relax your body:** A stiff body cannot move forward or retreat as desired. Relaxing your body will let you know your opponent's intention at the moment when your hand is in contact with him/her. This is called "listening to the force." Your relaxed hand, arm, body allows the information you have detected to reach your mind smoothly and clearly. Your quick and precise reaction will let your Chi reach your hands and feet. When you shift to your left side, your right side becomes empty. The Chi inside your body is like a wheel and is in perfect coordination with your movement.
3. **Collect your Chi:** Your movement will be in chaos if your Chi is loose and not concentrated. Collect your Chi when you are breathing in and breath out when you strike. Use your mind to harmonize your breathing and Chi.
4. **Concentrate your force:** Unite your force to become One, knowing where is full and where is empty. Force has to erupt from its origin (Dan Tian) and strike at the target at the right time.
5. **Focus your mind:** Your heart, body, Chi and force all obey the command of your mind. The mind is the Master of the four. A focused mind will let your Chi marry your mind and spirit. The full side of your body is not stiff and the empty side is not loose. The opening and closing of your postures will have order. Yin and Yang will continually transform from one state to another.

It is difficult for a beginner to comprehend the theory and principles of Tai Chi and to apply them during actual play. The first thing is to learn your Tai Chi form. Learn the correct stances, the arm and hand movements, and then the footwork. Learn how to turn and shift weight from one position to another. Most importantly, learn the name of each posture and its martial arts background. Understand the thirteen basic elements of Tai Chi: Ward Off, Roll Back, Squeeze, Pushing, Grabbing, Split, Elbow, and Shoulder; Forward, Retreat, Watch the Left, Guard the Right and Stabilize in the Center.

When you get more familiar with your routine, you will gradually shift your study to refining your posture movements and the height of your stances. Always touch your tongue to the inside of your upper mouth to connect your inner acupuncture meridian/channels (Ren and Du). Next learn the breathing technique and how to concentrate your mind. Learn the moving meditation.

At your refinement stage, review the Tai Chi principles. You will have a much better understanding by this time and be able to associate them with your play. Elevate your Tai Chi practice from a physical, routine exercise to an inner skill. Give your Tai Chi play a spirit.

There is no rule on how fast you should play your Tai Chi form. Let your play follow your breathing pace. Exhale while you strike and inhale while you concentrate your force. Some people play their Tai Chi forms at a very slow pace. If you can handle it and harmonize your breathing with your movement, then that is fine.

There is also no rule on how low or how high your stance should be; it depends on the style you are learning. Some styles are played in a relatively low stance by design. When you start to learn Tai Chi, your stance will be high since you are so busy copying everything that your teacher is doing. When you are more comfortable with your form, you will learn to lower down your stance in the way required by your style. A lower stance will let you have a better understanding of the coordination between your body weight shifting and turning. If you make yourself too low, then the distance between your two feet will be too far apart. You will lose your balance and be unable to recover from it. After you have learned to play in a lower stance, you will be able to do it correctly when you have to play in a high stance in a limited space.

During your play, your breathing should be fine, calm and in rhythm according to your movements. When you slide into meditation, "body breathing" will occur. You may also feel water in your mouth or may become sweaty. Those are the signs that you are entering your trance state. Keep your normal breathing cycle in your mind. Do not force yourself to breathe or to hold your breath. Your normal physical breathing will return in a few moves. Keep aware that you are in control and that you are playing your Tai Chi. In the trance state you may feel unspeakably pleasant and relaxed. If you follow your feeling, soon you may be in

a "no-no-land" state and forget your Tai Chi routine. Either you will eventually feel there is something wrong and have to stop or suddenly your mind will return to your play with no idea about what you just did. Since you were following your Chi's random flow you may have added many moves into your routine or ended up with a much longer playing time. If you find yourself losing control and need to stop, move to the ending posture. Tell yourself that you are finished and let the Chi return to its original place. Exit from your routine gracefully. Do the same ending as you would when you normally finish your play. Stay calm and do not become upset.

If you focus on your routine and its meaningful play then your trance will not be able to overrule your concentration. When you end your Tai Chi form you will leave the trance state and everything will be back to normal. Continued practice will teach you how to handle your trance state. Learn how to naturally alternate your body breathing with the normal breathing. Eventually you will be able to enter the trance state as you start your play and keep it until the end. Your inner skill will be at a new level.

Just like the calm styles of meditation, do not expect to find a "perfect" outdoor environment. In an ideal and quiet place, insects or small animals may come to you. Learn the ability to tune out a noisy background. Do not let your emotions take charge. Relying on music or your instructor to call out the posture names is not a good habit and should be avoided. Turn off or unplug your phone before you play Tai Chi. A good single time of play is better than a repetitive struggle. Do not over play.

It is much easier to learn a Tai Chi form than to refine it. Repeating your routine N times will help you get the moves and no longer become lost when you play. Refining your Tai Chi play is a lifelong endeavor. Dedicate your time and effort. With patience, the benefit of Tai Chi play will come to you.

Visit hsvtaichi.com for more information about the author and his Tai Chi class.