

Tai Chi As a Spiritual Practice
The First Step
by
I-chi

Tai Chi is the art of learning to move and act from within one's self. The first step is often the hardest and the most important. Can you imagine what it must have been like to take your first step as a young child? It was necessary to let go of fear. It was necessary to trust, to have faith in something unseen, to believe in yourself. It was necessary to give up the familiar security of sitting right where you are. What would cause a young child to give up what is familiar, secure, and safe, and try to take a step? What different awareness motivates that act? What different sense of self is there in taking that first step? What do we hold on to, and what do we let go of? These are the same questions that need to be answered by a student of Tai Chi.

We often go through life as if moved by every force outside of ourselves, rather than acting from within our own being. The world moves us. Relationships move us. We chase after a career. We are prodded by ego. We are often no longer moved from within ourselves — by our true self. Even the way we move our bodies becomes a matter of the worldly forces acting through us. As children we often move well, with ease, but something gets lost over time. Watch adults walking, moving. Look at the signs of effort, discomfort, imbalance, tension or stiffness, insecurity or unease in their movement. They have forgotten how to relax, let go, and step.

When you begin to learn Tai Chi you learn how to take that first step — again. Even an elderly person who has been practising Tai Chi can exhibit a gentle grace in movement, an ease, comfort, and balance. It is most noticeable in contrast to the typical person whose body, mind, and spirit have been beaten down or shaped by the outer world.

Can you imagine taking your first step in Tai Chi? For that moment, you give up caring how you look to anyone else, and only care about finding and trusting your own inner sense of balance, awareness, knowingness, and beingness. You become aware of what you feel within you, and ignore what is outside of you. You become aware of your breathing, how your chest and abdomen fill and empty. You notice how your mind and intention are the source of your actions. You remain quietly aware within yourself. You step gently, slowly, and smoothly.

If you have never practised Tai Chi, or if you wish to return to the innocence of that first step, here is what you do: Stand with your feet approximately shoulder width apart, arms hanging loosely at your sides. Unlock your knees by slightly bending them. Keep your feet in place. Now, find your own natural balance point by gently shifting your weight forward onto the balls of your feet, and then back onto your heels. You do not want to lean forward or backward so much that you lose your balance, but rather just a small amount so that you become aware of how your body is balanced from front to back. After you have found your front-to-back balance point, you need to find your side-to-side balance point by gently shifting more of your weight to one foot and then to the other. Keep your feet in place. Be aware of when you are balanced left to right. Do this a few times until you become familiar with your side-to-side balance point.

Notice, you need to keep your front-to-back balance when you do the side-to-side exercise, and keep your side-to-side balance point when you do the front-to-back exercise. Be aware of when you are in that one position in which you are completely balanced front-to-back and side-to-side.

Bring your feet together so that the heels are lightly touching and the front of the feet are slightly apart. Find your balance point. Keep your knees unlocked and slightly bent. Keep your back and head erect, but not stiff. This is the starting position in Tai Chi. Now it's time to take the first step in the Tai Chi form. Pick up and SLOWLY move your right foot approximately shoulder's width to your right, and gently put it down. Shift your weight and slowly come to your balance point.

How did that feel?

Did you tense up your neck, your shoulders, your arms, your back muscles, and abdomen? Did you hold your breath?

The idea in Tai Chi is to relax, to not tense up, and to not hold your breath. If you can do that when you take a simple step, you can practise doing it in every movement. Try it again, or take a step to the left, or forward, or backward, with either foot. And relax. Keep your head upright, look forward, and breathe evenly. At the end of each step, be sure you feel balanced; rest a moment, and then take another step. Always end in your own, comfortable balance point. In Tai Chi the body remains balanced even -while shifting or stepping, and moves as a unit. In other words, you learn to find the calm balance that is the basis of every movement, and carry it with you. And, if you can be aware of when you are in or out of balance, you can extend this to your mental, emotional, and spiritual state as well. Find your calm balance point in each of these areas, and you will truly have mastered moving through life with Tai Chi.

This is the first step of Tai Chi, which you may carry with you throughout your Tai Chi practise, and your life.

Tai Chi As a Spiritual Practice
Balance and Relaxation
by
I-chi

Tai Chi is a process of increasing awareness, through stillness and movement. It is ultimately about more than just physical balance and ease: it is about mental, emotional, and spiritual balance and ease. Finding your own sense of physical balance is a metaphor for finding true spiritual balance.

Consider the many things that can throw you off balance in life. These include stressful situations, world events, personal interactions, relationships, the work environment, the challenges of ageing, and health concerns. Now imagine that there is a natural balance point — which you may or may not have experienced for some time — on the mental, emotional, and spiritual level. Would you like to return to that place of balance in your life?

Here's a way to do it. If you have done the previous exercise ("The First Step"), it would be good to do that as a preliminary exercise in order to feel and be familiar with your body's own balance point. Next, stand in the starting position: heels lightly touching, front of the feet slightly apart, knees unlocked and slightly bent, back and head erect, but not stiff, arms hanging loosely at your sides. Pause for a minute in this position and be aware of your body. Particularly notice any tension in the neck, shoulders, arms, back, and abdomen. Relax those areas, breathing gently and evenly. Be sure to relax your breathing, and not hold your breath.

Now pick up and SLOWLY move your right foot approximately shoulder's width to your right, and gently put it down. Shift your weight and slowly come to your balance point. Feel balanced front-to-back and side-to-side. Keep your head and back erect and your eyes forward, yet remain relaxed. Be sure your knees are unlocked and slightly bent.

Now imagine your hands are floating on water, and allow them to slowly rise up and come to a place of rest on either side of you, in front of your hips. Imagine they are floating in place. Relax and hold this position for a minute.

How does it feel? As you stand there, let your awareness frame the following questions:

Be aware of your physical state. Are you aware of any tension or discomfort in your body?
Are you remaining in your natural balance position?

Be aware of your mental state. Do you feel anything pulling you to stop this exercise, any mental agitation or unease?

Be aware of your emotional state. Do you feel any emotions welling up or pulling at you?

Be aware of your spiritual state. Do you feel anything overshadowing your beingness, or

the peace, calm, stillness deep within you?

Whatever you notice pulling you away from that place of inner calm and balance, simply let go of it. You will find that it passes if you just let go of it, without trying to force anything. It doesn't take a lot of effort; it mainly takes some time to become familiar with that place of balance, and to recognize when you are being pulled away from it. Be aware, relax, breathe, and let go of whatever would displace you from your inner calm, peace, and balance.

When you are finished, let your hands slowly float down to rest at your sides. Over time, it is good to extend this quiet starting position to five or even ten minutes. Be aware during the entire time; if your mind forgets what you are doing, remember to scan your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual state. Notice anything other than quiet inner calm, and let go of it. Relax, let go of any stress and tension, and be more aware of your quiet, true, inner self.

If you find this exercise easy, and can comfortably do it for five or ten minutes without building up tension in your body, you may wish to try a more advanced form. Instead of letting your hands rest in front of your hips, allow them to float up in front of your chest, and form a circle with your arms as if you were embracing a large ball. Let your palms face towards you, and bring the fingertips of each hand close to each other but not touching. Let your shoulders relax and lower your elbows slightly. Hold this position for five minutes, and gradually move up to ten or even twenty minutes.

Remember, this is a spiritual exercise, an exercise in increasing awareness and centering yourself. It is not just a physical exercise. Maintain your balance, and notice if you are shifting your weight too far forward or backward on your feet (you will feel your weight on the balls or heels of your feet). Keep the head and spine erect and aligned, but not stiff. Breathe slowly, deeply, evenly. If you wish, you may slightly close (or completely close) your eyes, depending upon how stable you are in this position. It will increase your inner awareness greatly. Finally, you can place your tongue on the roof of your mouth, slightly curled back, to complete the inner connection. Practise this exercise daily, and you will grow in inner balance, peace, strength, harmony, and calmness.

You will find that each day you become more and more familiar with your place of inner balance: physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. And you may notice that you act from your own inner being more and more, rather than as a puppet of outer influences that pull on you from all sides.

Tai Chi As a Spiritual Practice **"Shen" — Spirit**

by
I-chi

Tai Chi may be practiced for health, exercise, martial arts, and/or spiritual growth. Many practitioners focus mainly on just one aspect. Most remain unaware of the spiritual nature of the practice, or begin to realize it only after many years. In fact, the spiritual nature of Tai Chi practice is fundamental. It should be understood at the very beginning.

One translation of Tai Chi is "The Supreme Ultimate." And a common symbol used to represent Tai Chi is the yin-yang sign. What are these mysterious concepts, and why are they mysterious at all? Even experienced practitioners commonly believe that all that is involved in Tai Chi is the balance of opposites (yin and yang). The truth is, Tai Chi is a means for going beyond duality, and realizing the Ultimate which lies beyond duality or opposites.

There is a saying in Tai Chi that the spirit leads the mind, and the mind leads the body. Unfortunately, as in yoga, students are often taught things backwards. For a long time, they are taught to focus on the body, its position and movement; much later they may be taught the role of the mind; and, finally (if at all) they are taught something about the nature of the spirit. This is one of the reasons why both yoga and Tai Chi are said to contain "mysteries" which only the masters who have practiced all of their lives may understand. Yet, it is possible for even a beginning student to understand the role of spirit, and develop spiritually from the start. Here is how.

First, understand that what you are seeking from Tai Chi is not just on the level of the physical body, but is something which goes beyond that. As you practice, you are growing in awareness. Awareness or consciousness is the most fundamental aspect of being; it is the most fundamental quality of spirit. Hence, whatever increases your awareness allows spiritual growth. Spiritual growth means coming closer to your true inner self and letting go of everything else, everything that is not spiritually supportive or progressive.

You may wonder at this point: doesn't everyone already act from their spirit, mind, and body, in all of their actions? And the answer is: no. Most people do not have a clear, conscious connection from their spirit to their mind to their body to all of their actions. Many have no connection at all to any conscious sense of inner being, or spirit. Their actions in life are often very habitual, programmed, and reactive to forces outside of them. In other words, their lives are ruled by forces beyond them, and not by a true inner self or spirit. This is why people have all sorts of addictions (to junk food, tobacco, alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, money, and so on). People respond to all kinds of influences from outside themselves, but remain disconnected from Spirit, within. And, the busier they are, the less likely they even try to connect with the Supreme Ultimate spiritual source. They are connected as if by strings to everything else.

By taking the time to practice Tai Chi, daily, you will find that the external strings begin to be

cut. You are able to act in a way that is more true to your inner being or spirit. You stand back from the rush of the outer world and let it go by you. You find a place to stand in your self.

So, Tai Chi is fundamentally a spiritual practice. When you do your exercises, keep the understanding, perspective, and awareness that you are coming closer to your true spirit, and you are letting go of everything else. When you are able to simply stand in one place, in the proper Tai Chi way, for half an hour, without accumulating any tension or stress, with a calm mind, body, and spirit, you will truly know that your spirit leads your mind, which leads your body. This deeper connection with Spirit, without having to rely upon any external dogma or belief system, grows with practice.

Students are usually taught the Tai Chi movements (often over a hundred of them), and instructed to perform each one in the correct fashion, without ever being taught the value of standing still. Yet, most of what can be gained from Tai Chi can be learned by simply standing still. All of the movements, no matter how accurately they are performed, cannot replace the awareness, calmness, inner strength, quiet mind, and spiritual connection that are developed with the proper focus.

Now that you know the true value of Tai Chi, we'll elaborate on how to do accomplish this. First of all, get ego, pride, ambition, or any sense of striving out of the way. Just let go of them. Let go of any sense of competition, the thought that you are competing with anyone, or the thought that someone else might be better or worse at this than you. Tai Chi is a spiritual exercise. You need to understand the difference between holding a position out of physical force, holding a position out of mental effort, and remaining in position in a place of spiritual calm, ease, and non-striving. Only the last one is ultimately productive, spiritually. So, if you wish to benefit from Tai Chi practice, you have to practice without relying upon physical force or muscular strength. And you need to bypass the mental aspect, which usually translates as "ego." Relax, let go of tension, stress, expectations, and disappointments. Find the deeper core of your inner being, the spirit. The spirit is quiet, calm, and unmoved by anything in the outer world. It is the one place you need to stand.

Tai Chi As a Spiritual Practice

Formless Form

by

I-chi

Tai Chi is generally taught and practiced in a form, a series of movements which flow from one to another. There are different styles and varieties of the Tai Chi form. Some emphasize complete relaxation and expanded movements; other include compact, forceful movements. In either case, though each movement has a particular meaning or application (especially in the martial arts), it is important to see and understand the "formless" in the form. In this way, we can see the common basis, or essence, of all Tai Chi styles, forms, and movements.

Bruce Lee was a renowned martial artist who sought the essence of form and movement. He did not believe in form just for the sake of form, or movement just for the sake of movement. Though he did not practice Tai Chi as his primary art, he was very much attuned to this philosophy of "formless form." So, what is the essence of movement?

Tai Chi practice is based on slow movements, at its core. Why would you want to move as slowly as you can? What is the value or essence of slow movement? People often experience greater awareness, the more slowly they move in Tai Chi. This is why the movements are slow and continuous, flowing from one to another: to create an unbroken awareness and sense of self, underlying all movements.

As we move quickly, habitually, through the modern world — we even put up with rush hour — we actually become less aware. When you move quickly or reflexively you rely upon motor skill, muscular coordination, and habit. Though you may become quite skilled in such behavior or movement, what is missing from such activities is true inner awareness. The self gets lost. The more you practice Tai Chi as a spiritual exercise, the more awareness you develop, and the more awareness you carry with you in all of your other activities in life.

So, what is the "formless" which underlies the Tai Chi form? It is the Spirit, the inner being, the consciousness, the self. As we have observed, a person may learn a given set of Tai Chi movements, and practice the form rigorously, and yet not really know the "mysteries" underlying the movements. Martial artists are eventually taught the application of all of the movements, but that is not their ultimate essence or meaning. Advanced practitioners may be taught (or begin to experience), the flow of inner energy (or "chi") which is even more fundamental to Tai Chi. This chi or energy lies close to the essence of Tai Chi, but even this vital energy is not the Supreme Ultimate. The Supreme Ultimate is Spirit, and it is the ultimate, unseen, formless, transcendent, essence of Tai Chi.

Rather than waiting for your Tai Chi practice to someday arrive at this mysterious state, it is possible to begin your practice at the early stages in this way. Perhaps you have already learned some Tai Chi movements, and wish to take your practice to a higher level. Here is how. First, let go of any thought of Tai Chi as a physical exercise or act. It is a movement that should flow

from spirit to mind to body. When you practice, move as slowly as possible, with the eyes barely open (or close them). And feel the unchanging in the changing, the unmoving in the moving — feel your self, your inner being, your underlying awareness. Be aware of that which is unchanging within you, regardless of what movements you perform. Be aware of the quiet, unchanging, continuity of your consciousness, the unmoving spirit. Learn how all movement comes from a place of non-movement. Feel that. Find it in your own terms, in your practice.

Here is a simple exercise, which we will call the "closing exercise" (as opposed to the standing still exercise we learned, which we will call the "opening exercise"). Begin in the starting position: standing with back and head erect, knees slightly bent, heels lightly touching, arms resting at your sides, tongue touching the roof of your mouth, breathing through your nose. Rest for a minute in this position, balanced, relaxed, centered, and let go of any tension in your body. Now let your palms slowly turn to face each other. And let each palm SLOWLY rise up in front of either side of your chest, as if they were gently scooping up air. Breathe in slowly and evenly during this rising part of the movement. Then, before your palms reach shoulder height, let your palms rotate to face downward and let them slowly float back down in front of you. Breathe out slowly and evenly during this part of the movement. Relax any tension in your body, especially your shoulders, back, neck, head, abdomen, and arms. Repeat the process as many times as you feel comfortable with (nine is a good start). When you are finished, relax completely and rest for a minute, standing in place, before ending.

What did you feel?

Learn to go beyond the usual physical and mental focus, beyond physical form and thought form. Feel the unchanging, quiet, calm, centered, strong, balanced, unmoving, aware, inner spirit. Practice this "closing exercise" daily after you do your "opening exercise" (standing still). If you already practice a given Tai Chi set, you may wish to perform the "opening exercise" before you begin, and do the "closing exercise" after your Tai Chi form. It will serve as a reminder to be aware of the unmoving, formless, inner spirit while you perform the Tai Chi movements. This is the ultimate goal of Tai Chi.

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