

The 10 Essential Principles of Tai Chi Practice

Yang Ch'eng-fu and first published in 1925, since then they have become the classic principles followed by thousands of tai chi practitioners seeking a deeper understanding into These 10 Essential Principles were taught by the legendary Yang this ancient art of tai chi. By contemplating these principles and incorporating them into your practice you can transform your tai chi into an art that will give you ever-increasing levels of satisfaction and beauty of form.

1. 虛靈頂勁 – The Head is naturally suspended from the Crown Point (Crown Chakra for Yoga Practitioners). Feel as if you are being magically lifted by an invisible strand of silk from Heaven. This allows for a feeling of openness and looseness in the spine making the spine extremely flexible. It also helps to imagine space between each of the vertebrae. The combination of the feeling of suspension and the spaciousness spine assists in correct postural alignment.
2. 含胸拔背– Keep the Chest relaxed while slightly stretching up the back. Slightly hollow the chest, this allows the breath to sink to the lower Dantian (下丹田) . If you protrude the chest the body can become “top heavy” and easy to topple over. Slightly Stretching up the back can help the energy (chi-氣) move up the back. The correct method should begin with the head suspended from the Bai Hui (百會) point and then actually feeling as if the chest were plucked up from the sternum area, then consciously imagine the shoulder blades melting down the spine
3. 鬆腰- Relax the Waist, the waist is like the flywheel, or the steering wheel for the energy coming through the body. The classics tell us if the waist is relaxed then the feet will have power and our foundation will be stable. If the waist is not relaxed, but is rigid then the waist will be too slow and cumbersome to direct the energy quickly and directly. In Chinese terms the waist area also includes the area of the hips.
4. 分虛實- Differentiate between Substantial and Insubstantial. You must clearly differentiate between the leg that is empty of weight and the leg that is the supporting leg. It is important to be able to load up one leg from the other in an easy and smooth transition of weight. This can be done quickly or slowly, but be careful of being caught with the weight even distributed between the two legs, this creates slowness and cumbersome movement translating into a loss of speed and agility.
5. 沉肩墜肘- Relax the Shoulders and Sink the Elbows. The shoulder must always be relaxed and this is one of the most difficult things for most beginning tai chi practitioners to do. We are often unaware of the unconsciousness tension we carry in the shoulders; practicing tai chi is a great way to become aware of this tension so that we can eventually, through awareness, begin to let it go. If the shoulders are tense then the lever for the delivery of force will stop at the shoulder. That is why in tai chi it is so important to relax the shoulder. If the elbows rise up, it creates tension in the shoulder, so one must learn to sink the elbows.
6. 用意不用力- Use the Mind not Strength, let the Yi (意) lead the Chi (氣) . Or letting the mind lead the energy. Even though Tai Chi Chuan (太極拳) is a highly effective martial art, the power comes from the mind and not from the muscle. This is a most difficult concept for most martial artist to grasp. How can you have an effective fighting art without using muscular strength? In tai chi the body becomes very pliable like a whip and the force is directed though the body by the mind. So in this art the mind is most powerful as well as having a body that is free from tension. Tension in the body is like having a kink in a hose. The energy will stop wherever there is

a kink, just like a kink in a hose stops the water from coming through in full force, only a dribble comes out. It is exactly the same concept in tai chi. We must quiet the mind so that we cause the mind to direct the chi. A disturbed or distracted mind cannot do this. This is one reason why the practice of tai chi has become to be known as a “**moving meditation**”, because of the mindfulness involved in the practice of tai chi.

7. 上下相隨 - Unity of the Upper Body and Lower Body, the upper body and lower body must interact together in constant connection. Kinesthetically we refer to this as successive contraction, or like flicking dominos to make them fall consecutively. Movement begins in the feet with a sense of being rooted from below the earth, then bringing that ground strength up through the legs, it is commanded or directed by the waist and if there is no obstruction in the shoulders then the energy is issued through the hands. Actually accomplished tai chi masters can issue the energy from anywhere on their body. The eyes are important in the direction of energy. The body must be relaxed so that the energy can travel through the body. The mind directs the flow of energy.

8. 內外相合 - The Unity of Internal and External, in tai chi it is important that the mind, the body and the breath come into single focus. The mind is the spirit and the commander of the body. The body follows the mind responding effortlessly and without interruption. This comes with concentration and single-minded practice. When the body and the mind are one and there is no division between what the mind directs and the instantaneous response in the body. It is effortlessness in its highest form.

9. 相連不斷- Continuity without Interruption, unlike the external styles of martial arts where there is a beginning and an end point, the practice of tai chi is more fluid, in fact sometimes described as moving like a great river. Once we separate from wu chi (無極) we are in a constant flux of motion alternating between yin and yang.

10. 動中求靜 - Seeking Stillness in Movement, even in movement there is a sense of stillness. When practicing tai chi, there is always a state of tranquility in the mind, like the eye in the center of a hurricane. From this serene perspective it is easier to focus the attention completely aware and open. When completely open and aware the chi can sink into the lower dantain.