

Key Principles for Tai Chi Practice



Regardless of the style of Taijiquan you practice, it is important that you apply the basic taiji principles in your form. Ideally, you will learn to integrate these principles in all aspects of your life, not just when you are not practicing a Taijiquan form. If you are walking down the street using the taiji principles, then you are practicing taiji as you walk. If you are doing your form practice, but not applying these principles to your form practice, then, to the extent you are not following the principles, you are not really doing taiji. Learning to apply these principles in your Taijiquan practice is very difficult and may take a lifetime, but the rewards are worth the effort. Be patient and persevere.

1. Relax

Relax both the body and the mind. This does not mean you collapse and zone out like a couch potato. To be relaxed is to be free of all unnecessary tension in both the body and the mind while remaining alert and engaged with your surroundings. This is perhaps the most difficult principle to practice. Your understanding of what it means to be relaxed will change over time as your experience and level of taiji changes.

2. Separate weight

Throughout our taiji practice we express Yin and Yang through separation of the insubstantial and the substantial. This is most evident in the separation of weight. When one foot is full (has 100% of your weight), the other is empty and has no weight. As we transition from one posture to the next, we strive to move like a cat – setting the moving foot down lightly first before slowly shifting our weight into it. Never fall into the foot with your weight as you move from one leg to the other. During practice you can occasionally check this by stopping during transitions – stay in the substantial foot and see if you can move the foot you just placed on the floor by just a fraction of an inch off the floor without jerking your body. If not, you probably haven't completely separated the weight.

3. Turn the waist

The waist is central to all taiji movements. The waist controls and directs all movement. Here the waist refers to the pelvic girdle or area surrounding and including the pelvis rather than the place where your belt is usually located. You can think of your upper body as a unified cylinder resting on top of the pelvis, which acts as a tray supporting the upper body. You never twist the body. You turn the hips / pelvis area and this then causes the movement of the upper body. The Chinese term “kua” refers to the area where the top of the femur is linked to the pelvis and includes the crease where the thigh connects with the torso. The energy coming from the ground through the legs causes the femurs to move the pelvis, much like pistons move a drive shaft, which then causes the upper body to turn.

4. Keep body upright

Proper alignment is very important. You should keep your body upright. Your spine should be straight and relaxed with the tailbone gently tucked under. Your head should be upright as if suspended by a thread from the ceiling but with no tension, and your jaw slightly tucked in. By properly stacking your skeleton you reduce the need for muscle exertion to a minimum and create an optimal structure for movement and relaxation. Your spine works much like an axle around which your body turns.

5. Beautiful Ladies Hands

Beautiful Ladies Hands is a principle found in the Cheng Man-Ching form, which is generally not found in other taiji forms. The hand and wrist stay straight and relaxed and they are a flat extension of arm. There is a straight line from the tip of the middle finger to the elbow. This is to reduce tension and improve energy flow. Punches are also done in this manner. The only exceptions in the Cheng form are during the Preparation posture, when the wrists make 5 changes, and the “Hook Hand” in the Single Whip posture.

Taijiquan Grandmaster Benjamin Lo points to these five principles as key to good taiji practice and adds a sixth – doing all five of them at the same time. This is very difficult to do. That is why we must continually work on the principles in our practice.

Additional Principles for Tai Chi Practice:

6. **Be mindful** of what you are doing throughout your practice
7. **Stay centered** – focus on the “dan tian” (your body’s energy center and also its center of gravity – 1.3 inches below the navel and about half way between your front and your spine) throughout practice
8. **Slow movement** – move slow to learn to integrate all principles into your movement
9. **Continuous, even flow of movement** throughout practice of the form from first movement to last – as if gently pulling a thread of silk so as to keep even tension on the thread and not break it
10. **Use the mind**, not force, to make movements – the mind leads the body – your intentions lead your movements
11. **Connection** – the whole body moves as one unit with all parts connected; when one part moves, all parts move together
12. **Sink your weight** – let your weight sink so that your lower body is heavier and your upper body lighter; **root** yourself into the ground through your feet as your weight naturally sinks with gravity.
13. **Breathe naturally** – breathe through the nose, gently rest tongue where top teeth meet the roof of the mouth, inhale to the abdomen and let abdomen expand as you inhale and contract as you exhale – the way a young child breathes
14. **Be soft** – adapt, yield and flow like water, soft overcomes hard
15. **Swimming in air** – Professor Cheng said practicing tai chi is like swimming in air. Relax and feel the air and your movement.
16. **Eyes open, relaxed and soft** - Your eyes should be open, relaxed, and soft. Do not focus on any point outside of yourself, rather just be aware of and open to your surroundings while being mindful of the internal aspects, such as feeling your dan tian /center and maintaining the principles - body upright, turning from the waist, separating weight, being relaxed, etc.

As we learn and internalize all of these principles we also unify our body and mind.

To get the full benefits of Tai Chi you need to practice daily

Important safety tips:

Tai chi practice has many health benefits, but it can be strenuous. It is always a good idea to get a check-up or talk to your doctor before you begin any new physical activity.

If you have any health issues related to physical activity, always let your tai chi teacher know.

Good body structure / posture is important. Always keep knees aligned with toes

Never twist your knees – keep them straight using only the natural bend of the knee's hinge joint

In the 70-30 stance, never extend your front knee beyond the toes

If you ever experience pain – stop immediately! If pain occurs, seek medical attention and tell your tai chi teacher.

