

STAR CHART - Evaluating Teaching Skills Checklist for T'ai Chi Chih Teachers and Evaluators

Teacher _____

Evaluator _____

Date _____

Class for: _____

The purpose of this checklist is to help teachers to improve their teaching methods and pass on T'ai Chi Chih at the highest level possible. It is a guideline on how to teach and structure TCC classes. Self-evaluation and reflection are key to teaching excellence.

Directions: "Put a star next to the number, if you observed this in class."

1. Started class on time
 2. Greeted students and welcomed new students
 3. Invited students to quiet down in gentle way
 4. Verbally set the focus for the practice
 5. Used Direct Instruction to teach (show and tell)
 6. Lead the practice with verbal cues and general corrections of movements
 7. Demonstrated the whole movement sequence before breaking it into parts
 8. Asked questions to whole class / solicited answers, with whole class responding aloud
 9. Gathered students in a circle to open/close to purposely connect all students
 10. Used Partner Practice Strategy in class to empower student learning
 11. Used Think Aloud Strategy to show students how to monitor their internal processes
 12. Suggested ways for students to refocus the mind while moving or in Rest Pose
 13. Encouraged student interaction of sharing, questioning, exploring, working with each other
 14. Asked *why questions* to all students, to promote Higher Level Thinking skills
 15. Used positive feedback/ praise to whole class (not just one student at a time)
 16. Shared their own personal stories to engage students
 17. Encouraged student leadership: students made comments, demo a movement, told a personal story
 18. Teacher embodied spiritual qualities of TCC – *joy, calmness, serenity, inner sincerity, stillness, etc.*
 19. Used humor appropriately to relax and engage students
 20. Used appropriate music to help students relax
 21. Used Justin Stone's books, DVD's, recordings in class
 22. Used Visual Aides: charts, chalkboard, handouts, DVDs/videos, other printed material in class
 23. Adequate Classroom environment (heat, light, ventilation, chairs, accessibility, bathrooms)
 24. Taught/Demonstrated basics of Seated form of T'ai Chi Chih
 25. Taught some *chi stimulation* techniques / warm ups / seijaku /sitting meditation
- Focus on the Four Principles of Movement: • Stance/ Foot Position • Flowing From Center • Complete Weight Shift (yinning and yanging) • Vertical Alignment of the Spine
26. Teacher specifically encouraged *correct stance /foot position*
 27. Teacher specifically encouraged *flowing from center*
 28. Teacher specifically encouraged *complete weight shift*
 29. Teacher specifically encouraged *vertical alignment of the spine*
 30. Teacher specifically encouraged *mental focus on soles of the feet*
 31. Teacher specifically encouraged *stillness in Rest Pose*

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TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR T'AI CHI CHIH TEACHERS

An Explanation of Each Descriptor from the Star Chart for TCC Teachers

The Star Chart for Teachers is based on educational practices and standards that many businesses and teaching disciplines use successfully. These strategies produce the best results when working with groups of people in a learning context. These are the most natural, efficient and effective ways to stimulate learning and social cooperation. These are called Best Practices.

The following descriptors are teaching strategies developed from studies of Educational Practices and Brain-based Research on learning. These strategies are applicable to a wide range of educational settings and skills. T'ai Chi Chih classes are greatly enhanced by applying these teaching strategies.

1. Started Class on Time

Starting class on time demonstrates to students that the skills and knowledge you have to offer are important. Teacher/student has an unspoken contract with each other: the teacher will teach new skills and the student will show up to learn. It shows that each values their time and it shows respect to self, to peers in class, and to the teacher. When students are chronically late, you can discuss this principle of respect with them and often they will stop being late.

2. Greeted Students and Welcomed New Students

Greeting students by name shows that the teacher cares if they are there, and shows hospitality and friendliness. It helps students relax and trust the teacher, and indirectly trust each other. Many adults come to learning with feelings of inadequacy and fear, based on events of childhood and trying to learn basic skills. Greeting new students and telling them it is OK to be new helps everyone to relax. Reminding everyone to have a *beginner's mind... open and curious* helps all students to approach learning without anxiety and judgment.

3. Invited Students to Quiet Down in a Gentle Way

Setting the tone of quiet serenity is important for large classes as well as small groups. It signals each person that there is now a shift in intent, from socializing to focusing on getting quiet to prepare for meditation and movement. Ringing a bell or singing bowl is an excellent way to gather everyone without shouting and being intrusive. Teachers who use clear procedures find that their classes flow from one activity to another with minimum directions.

4. Verbally Set the Focus for the Practice It is helpful to let all students know how the class will proceed with a brief overview of the hour: [review, group practice, Partner Practice, sharing, closing] or the format used in the class. It guides all students to know what is expected and reminds them of what the focus is for the lesson that day. It reminds them of why they are there and

focuses their intent to be successful.

5. Used Direct Instruction to Teach - (Show and Tell) Direct instruction is the most potent way to introduce new skills to learners. Students can hear, see, sense, feel, and think about what is being taught before they try it themselves. During direct instruction, the student is already engaged in planning, imagining, and visualizing how they will perform this skill. Intuitive thoughts and spatial/temporal awareness are stimulated in the process of careful observation. When students become good observers, they can pick up the subtleties of the movement with little verbal input. Show and tell means just that: demonstrating how to move with no verbal input, and continually reviewing with more demonstration and explanation.

6. Lead the Practice with Verbal Cues and General Correction of Movements Learning theory confirms that students learn best when movement patterns are taught and reinforced at the kinesthetic level, *while students are moving*. It holds that students are often capable of self-correcting when told what to *do*, how to *feel*, and what to *sense*, *as they are moving*. This coaching model is used worldwide with amateur and professional athletes, with excellent results. Giving individual corrections is much more time-consuming, and sometimes necessary. Corrections given to the whole group reinforces group learning and puts the responsibility on the individual to make the changes needed. Group correction focuses on *what to adjust*, not on *who* is making the error.

7. Demonstrated the Whole Movement Sequence Using brain-based research methods, scientists are now able to study how brains learn and how brains prefer to process information. From these studies, educators now accept the fact that *the brain prefers to learn from whole to part*. In teaching movement, the whole movement needs to be demonstrated first. Later, it can be “broken down into parts,” but the first learning must be holistic. From the whole picture, the brain can often understand a part... but will have difficulty in *seeing the whole* from just a part. The word “gestalt” refers to the whole sequence, the whole image, and this applies to movement as well as to objects and thoughts. Gestalt learning is the foundation of visual learning.

8. Asked Questions to Whole Class / Solicited Answers with Whole Class Responding Aloud

Thinking and comprehension are important skills for teachers to emphasize in their teaching process. Asking questions to the whole class gives the message: *“This question is for all of you to think about.... and I want you to think, to be engaged in your learning, and I want to hear a response from everyone, even if it is not correct.”* When a question is asked and only one person responds, everyone else shuts down and does not *engage*. Whole group response is

powerful and moves students into an *internal dialogue*, a mode of recalling, wondering, reflecting, and then responding. Over time, this has a very positive affect on all students, even those in the back of the classroom who prefer to disengage. Group response is fun! Your students will enjoy the process and being to expect it.

9. Gathered Students in a Circle to Open/Close to Purposely Connect all Students

The power of the circle is known universally as the simplest, most balanced way to build community and connect people socially. When all are in a circle, there is equality. Everyone can see and hear everyone else. When the teacher is part of the circle, it establishes the subtle message that “*we all learn from each other, we all support each other, all are welcome and included.*” It is very beneficial to begin and close T’ai Chi Chih class in a circle. This opening provides a moment for welcoming, setting the intent of the class, and balancing the energy of the group as they begin to move; then later, it is a good configuration for reviewing, encouraging home practice, making announcements, and celebrating someone in class. Note: Teaching movement in rows during the middle of the class is helpful for most students, especially to those who experience right/left confusion and don’t easily follow a *mirror image* of modeling from the teacher.

10. Used Partner Practice Strategy in Class to Empower Student Learning

More than any other technique, Partner Practice has multiple payoffs for all students. Partner Practice provides a dynamic learning activity for every student, no matter what their level of proficiency or how long they have practiced. As social beings, people learn best in a context in which interaction is expected and encouraged.

Partner Practice allows people to relax and enjoy the process of learning. It gives students control of their learning, deepens their understanding, and improves their motivation to learn. It creates confidence and enhances performance of T’ai Chi Chih moves. It encourages collaborative interaction with students for mutual support. It moves students to their “learning edge” where new learning can occur. It helps them discover “*what they know ... and what they don’t know.*” It increases student understanding of movement principles about how to move. It insures that all students are learning and exploring T’ai Chi Chih effectively. Can Partner Practice do all of this? Yes, it can, and more!

11. Used Think Aloud Strategy to Show Students How to Monitor their Internal Process

Think Alouds is another well-documented teaching strategy used at all levels of learning, from kindergarten through college. It helps students become aware of the internal process, *the inner talk*, going on in the mind, while performing a

skill or movement. This process reveals all the nuances of thoughts and feelings, *in the moment*, as the person moves. The average student may not be aware of *the inner processes of sensing and feeling*. The Think aloud process helps students gain new insights quickly, as they hear what they might experience, as described by their teacher or another student.

For example, the Teacher says: “ I am going to demonstrate Bass Drum, using the Think Aloud method so that you will know everything that is going on in my mind as I do this movement. I want to describe my thoughts, feelings, and awareness *as it arises*, so that you can observe not just the movement, but also become aware of my mental processes.”

“ I am going to pause first with Rest Pose to center myself and quiet my mind... I am aware that emptying my mind is not easy when I am talking ... Now I am shifting the

weight to the right side in order to step forward with the left foot. I remember to place the heel down first and soften my knees... Now my weight is moving me forward, and my hands are facing, palm-to-palm. I let go of tension in my shoulders and my hands begin to drop down and move outward.”

“I let my arms move with my body, making no effort to “make the circle.” I relax and soften my wrists. As I am move backwards... my arms and hands flow back, with my body leading. My hands complete the circle with no effort. I purposely remember to be soft and everything just seems to flow.”

“I am noticing now that my weight shift was not as smooth this time and I need to slow down a little more and focus on smoothness. I am aware that as I move back, my hips and pelvis are making small adjustments to receive the weight coming into my back leg. I like the feeling of completion when I feel the weight fully in the back leg, and I am ready to flow forward again...it feels solid and strong and even...hummm, flexible and soft. I notice that my mind is getting calmer even though I am talking... I am aware that I am slipping into a meditative state while I am moving... It feels spacious and open and very calm...”

“As I close, I am aware that part of me still wants to do more of this move ... I slowly conclude and wait until the weight is in a back foot before bringing my other foot into Rest. I soften my knees and let my whole body sink vertically. It feels *like an elevator going down slowly*.”

“In Rest, I let my mind clear ... I just stand like a tree in the forest. I notice that my hands are vibrating a little... I notice that I am swaying slightly as I rest. I feel the energy still coming into balance. I am waiting for a subtle feeling of fullness, of completion... Ah, there it is.”

This teaching technique motivates students *to activate their awareness and focus as they are moving*, a skill that all students need to learn and use when doing T'ai Chi Chih.

12. Suggested Ways for Students to Refocus the Mind while Moving or in Rest Pose

Meditative focus can be supported very easily in class by using key words to

suggest that students focus on the soles of the feet, bring their attention down, and become present. Over a period of time, a key word like “*connect*,” “*soles*,” or “*bubbling spring*” is enough of a hint for all to gather their attention and refocus it. Those teachers who refocus students regularly find that the TCC practice in class is often deep, and *stillness within* is experienced by all.

13. Encouraged Student Interaction of Sharing, Questioning, Exploring, Working with Others

T'ai Chi Chih classes that are interactive produce students who are self-motivated, self-confident, and self-aware. Students can demonstrate a movement, tell a personal story, and ask questions without being afraid or embarrassed. They are motivated to learn from others and are open to the process of learning and discovering something new. Students are more supportive and less judgmental in working with others, and learn skills and concepts faster. They also demonstrate the ability to recall and understand the vocabulary better than those who are passive.

14. Asked *Why Questions* to All Students, to Promote Higher Level Thinking Skills The ultimate goal of the teacher is to enable all students to perform the movements well and to know the principles underlying the movements. The teacher can stimulate reasoning by asking why questions to the whole group, pausing, and then expecting students to answer verbally. This is called Group Response and is a powerful tool of instruction and recall. These questions make them realize that there is a purpose to every T'ai Chi Chih move and they should know what it is. Ask questions like: why do we soften the knees? Why is vertical alignment important? Why should my front foot be pointed straight ahead? Why do we come into Rest after each movement? Why do we focus the mind? Why do we move slowly? Etc.

15. Used Positive Feedback/ Praise to Whole Class (not just one student at a time)

The power of Positive Feedback cannot be over-estimated. It is the glue that holds the students to the best performance possible. It stimulates relaxation and satisfaction and reinforces what you've taught. It lets students know what they are doing correctly. When the teacher sees a need to correct a movement in some way, they can make the suggestion to the whole class, then pause and observe if anyone has made a change. For example, you might say: “everyone check right now... see if you are keeping your heel down until the last moment of the forward movement... let your leg lengthen... and let the heel release on its own...and now settle back into the floor.” If you see some change, say “yes” or “good.” This verbal guidance process is done while students and teacher are moving. If your back is always to the students, you won't be able to help them make these changes. Consider facing them or moving at an angle, so you can

see them and monitor their progress.

16. Shared Their Own Personal Stories to Engage Students

One of the most interesting ways to engage students' interest and attention is with personal stories of your experiences with T'ai Chi Chih, or with stories of other teachers and students who also experienced the health benefits. Stories are more captivating and memorable than a page of research data. All people love stories and love to have the opportunity to tell their own story. This should be an integral part of sharing time for students.

17. Encouraged Student Leadership: students made comments, demo a movement, told a personal story

Planning overt ways for students to share what they know, demonstrate a movement, or tell a story are all effective strategies that empower student learning. Interactive classes are more motivating and exciting, more successful in giving students the feeling of esteem from their classmates. This builds leadership skills, confidence in the form, and prepares them to become good future T'ai Chi Chih teachers. Student leadership could take the form of: reading an inspiring quote from Justin Stone's materials, demonstrating a movement to the whole class, telling a story about their T'ai Chi Chih practice at home, talking about their experience of chi, etc.

18. Teacher Embodied the Spiritual Qualities of T'ai Chi Chih – joy, calmness, serenity, stillness, focused awareness, inner sincerity, etc. The demeanor of the T'ai Chi Chih teacher has a significant impact on all students. They model the results of their own TCC practice. The fruits of their practice are often visible to others: calmness in the midst of chaos, kindness, flexibility, being non-judgmental, not complaining about their own problems. *Stillness within* is a gift that good teachers give their students, by the way they teach and the ways they are spiritually available to their students, that is, *authentic in word and action*.

19. Used Humor Appropriately to Relax/ Engage Students

Everyone appreciates a good story... something funny that happened in class, to you or to another person on a topic that is related to T'ai Chi Chih practice or chi. Jokes for the sake of being funny are not appropriate for use in class and lead the students off the subject. Justin Stone often tells stories about himself or a famous Zen monk, etc. and his students and teachers love him for that.

20. Used Appropriate Music to Help Students Relax

Music is an important way to relax students at the physical and mental level, and *to switch* on the right hemisphere for learning. The right hemisphere is holistic and processes sensory information that is simultaneous, temporal, and spatial. Soft relaxing music stimulates "*the relaxation response*" in the body

and encourages a shift in breathing. Music signals a sense of letting go that is more effective and immediate than verbal suggestions to let go of tension. Music also masks environmental noises and the hum of lights. It encourages students to relax, focus, and be present.

21. Used Justin Stone's Books, DVD's, Recordings in Class

Justine Stone has much to offer T'ai Chi Chih students from a lifetime of exploring aspects of chi circulation and meditation. His manual and many books are a rich resource of information and interesting stories. Using quotes from these resources in class will inspire students. They will want to get a copy of the book for further study. To truly understand the art of T'ai Chi Chih, you should be familiar with the wisdom contained in all of Justin Stone's books. Other materials are also effective for providing inspiration to students. Journals, magazines, books, poetry, articles from the Internet, quotes from famous people, etc. all serve to support and connect students to key concepts of T'ai Chi Chih.

22. Used Visual Aides: Charts, Chalkboard, Handouts, DVDs/ Videos, Other Printed Material

Statistics show us that 70 % of what we learn is through the *visual* channel. Students who have problems remembering and those that are bilingual especially need visual support for learning. Charts in class, handouts, and video materials help them review what is being said or demonstrated and builds knowledge and memory skills. A chalkboard and white board is very useful when teaching skills and concepts. Power Point presentations are another effective tool for teaching softness, flow, alignment and other concepts.

23. Adequate Classroom Environment: (heat, light, ventilation, chairs, accessibility, bathrooms)

This strategy of preparation is key to creating a great environment for learning. Know your student population and set up your classroom so that it is inviting, accessible, comfortable, etc. Noise and other issues have a negative effect on the overall experience and impact a student's desire to learn meditation. A classroom that is inviting can make all the difference in helping students calm down and relax. One often remembers the physical environment of a room long after a class has concluded. A classroom that is clean and orderly with something of beauty always is noticed and appreciated by students.

24. Taught/Demonstrated Basics of Seated Form of T'ai Chi Chih

For students who need accommodations (for various reasons) to the standing TCC form, it is important to teach the seated form of TCC so that they do it correctly. All students should be shown the basics of Seated TCC so that they can use it if they are injured or ill in the future. They should know that the form

still embodies the basic principles of: Moving from center, Complete weight shift, and Vertical alignment of the spine. Correct foot position is less important when seated, but moving from center is critically important, so that they are not just leaning over. The arm and hand movements can be minimal but still need to retain the circular, soft movement patterns. Mental focus is also an important skill, placing the focus on the *dantien* or on the soles of the feet.

25. Taught Some CHI Stimulation Techniques / warm ups / Seijaku/ sitting meditation Incorporating CHI stimulation and sitting meditation as part of the TCC class is very worthwhile use of time. It encourages centering, experiencing deeper meditation, and absorbing what was experienced in class that day. It begins to build a tangible positive social group experience *of being rather than doing*. Most groups that sit together begin to ask for more and begin to do meditation at home. As a stress reduction technique, this is one of the most effective when done with the support of a group.

FOCUS ON THE FOUR PRINCIPLES OF MOVEMENT:

Students need constant review in order to activate / recall learned concepts and apply these to what is being presented. Charts of the T'ai Chi Chih principles of movement are very helpful when they are visible in class and are referred to regularly. The principles should be demonstrated regularly, even in continuing classes, so that all students learn how to move well.

26. Teacher Specifically Encouraged *Correct Stance/Foot Position* Correct Stance/Foot Position is key to beginning each T'ai Chi Chih movement and building a good foundation of support for the weight shift. This has a direct effect on balance, comfort, and ease of movement.

27. Teacher Specifically Encouraged *Flowing from Center* Flowing from Center is key to helping student experience moving as a unit, and leading from the *dantien*. It also requires soft knees, a lower stance, and slow, even shift of weight. Flowing from center insures that the upper body is not moving faster than the lower half.

28. Teacher specifically Encouraged *Complete Weight Shift* Complete weight shift (yinning and yanging) is essential to correct movement and circulation of the chi. It needs to be demonstrated in the forward/back and side- to- side movements regularly.

29. Teacher specifically Encouraged *Vertical Alignment of the Spine* Vertical Alignment of the Spine is key to moving with no tension in the body, upper torso, etc. Leaning is always a sign that the lower half of the torso (and *dantien*) is not leading, and the student is reaching forward, leaning backward,

or to the side.

30. Teacher specifically Encouraged *Mental Focus on Soles of the Feet* The meditative aspect of T'ai Chi Chih is very important. Without it, it is just waving your arms and moving your legs. Justin often emphasizes the importance of mental focus, awareness, and vigilance. With our culture in a stressed-out mode most of the time, this mental focus is key to helping students *calm the mind*. It is important to refer to soles of the feet in every class, not just once a month. It should be an ongoing mantra of bringing the attention back to the soles of the feet.

31. Teacher specifically Encouraged *Stillness in Rest Pose* Stillness in Rest Pose is essential to balancing the chi and absorbing the chi deeply. Students improve greatly when encouraged to really focus and allow stillness to be visible in their body. Regular verbal reminders *to move into stillness* and *quietly abiding* are effective ways to help students become still within. A practice in class can feel like a spiritual experience when lead with the intention to discover stillness and serenity, here and now.

OVERALL IMPRESSION OF TEACHING SKILLS - (page 2 of Star Chart)

1. Demonstration of T'ai Chi Chih Movements - (correct performance)

Some teachers become experts in their field because of an inner motivation to improve. They often engage in an ongoing process of self-assessment and evaluation. This is critical to passing on knowledge, skills, and concepts at the highest levels. All T'ai Chi Chih teachers owe it to their students and to their original teacher to continue to be open to learning and peer review, so that they are currently modeling T'ai Chi Chih correctly, at its highest level. It is not acceptable for teachers to change the TCC movements from their original form. It is the duty and responsibility of each accredited teacher to continue to refine the form and deepen their practice. It is essential for them to seek ways to improve the ways in which they teach. Reflection and student feedback are a good way to start.

2. Direct Instruction- (modeling, showing, role playing)

Direct Instruction is basic to the acquisition of skills. It requires modeling *how to perform a movement pattern*, showing students the sequence of the movement, the subtle nuances of how to move. It engages the visual, spatial and temporal channels of learning in the brain. It is both a right- and left-brain function. Direct instruction is essential when eliciting the best performance from students. Without modeling, students must rely on prior knowledge, which may not be adequate for successful performance of T'ai Chi Chih. Review is an important aspect of Direct Instruction.

3. Teacher's Voice Projection

For most learners, attention fluctuates and must be continually refocused. It is said that most adults can concentrate for *only a few minutes*.... It is important that all students can hear the teacher easily, without fatigue. When amplifying systems were installed in regular classrooms to assist a hearing impaired person, performance on tests improved for ALL STUDENTS. This shows the need of all students to hear as well as see what is being taught. In some T'ai Chi Chih classes, the teacher's soft, meditative voice does not project well to all students, only those in the first row. Be sure your voice is heard and pleasing in quality and tone. If necessary, use an amplified sound system. It will benefit every student.

4. Verbal Instruction

There is a difference between *talking* and *teaching*. Teachers who talk may be telling stories, reciting past events, making comments on current issues, making announcements, reading an article, or relating socially to students. This is not teaching.

Teaching means using verbal instruction to teach a skill, convey a principle, guide a practice session and give general supportive hints on how to move. Ask yourself: am I talking or am I teaching? Am I helping a student gain understanding and improve their performance or am I just entertaining my students with amusing comments? Verbal instruction should be simple, clear, and precise. It should not be wordy or too theoretical. It should inform but not bore your students. Use verbal instruction as needed; when it is not needed, don't talk.

5. Time for Movement during Class

TCC classes for adults are basically movement classes. Students should be doing T'ai Chi Chih, moving 70 – 80 % of the time or more, not just standing/sitting and listening. If the class time is longer than one hour, a variety of activities can be used: partner practice, sharing, discussion on home practice or a particular movement along with movement and practice.. In these classes, there still should be movement 70 – 80 % of the time.

6. Pace of Class

The pace of the class is critical to conveying the art of meditation. Class content should be interesting, even challenging, and moving at a pace appropriate for the highest level of absorption of skills and concepts. Some classes drag on forever because the teacher is talking too much; other classes run in *fast forward*, with little regard to Rest Pose, stillness, and meditation. If you ask for feedback about the pace of your class, let the students do so anonymously. They will then be truthful.

Look at your students and read their nonverbal cues: are they bored, turned off, checking their watch, talking to their neighbor? Or are they engaged, interested,

interactive.

7. Sense of Ease and Relaxation of Teacher

The teacher is the best role model for demonstrating the benefits of TCC meditation. Their display of ease and relaxation conveys to students that this practice produces *real benefits* that are available to them as well as the teacher. Acting calm and relaxed is different from actually being calm and relaxed. Students can sense the difference and the mere presence of a person who is *calm, serene, and present* can strongly promote those qualities in students. It all starts with the breath and being mentally focused.

8. Evidence of Mental Focus of Teacher

Possibly the most important skill a teacher can bring to students is the ability to sustain a mental focus and composure while teaching class. Modeling this can have a greater impact on students than 1000 words of wisdom. When a teacher is mentally focused, nothing escapes their attention: they are aware of the energy of the students, who is on task, who is not feeling well, who is distracted, etc. Teachers with good mental focus can lead and teach intuitively, knowing what to do when something unexpected arises, and adjusting their plans in the blink of an eye. Teachers who have mental focus are present to their students and to the greater process of learning as a shared experience.