



Update

Hello!

I hope you are enjoying the fall season! It's been a few months since my last update. My Milano Senior Center classes are going well. We are almost finished with the first course of instruction in Tai Chi for Arthritis and about to begin a new round of instructions in a few weeks. My online 24 Forms class is going well. It is in the beginning stages, so it's not too late to join if you are interested. Check out the schedule at my website: tcsk8rchun.com.

And I am excited to perform at the Frog Pond Skating Spectacular this year, Dec. 1 for the Christmas Tree Lighting and Dec. 31 for First Night at the Boston Common!

Key Insight - Body Awareness and Interoception

With each newsletter, I'd like to share a key insight. In this newsletter, I'd like to talk about a subject not often discussed - body awareness and interoception.

Body awareness is an important part of tai chi. It is necessary for applying *soong* (鬆), which can be described as eliminating muscle tension and expanding the joints from within. It is necessary for applying *jing* (勁), which is force management strategy, encompassing force initiation, force propagation, force distribution, and force dissipation.

Body awareness, as discussed here, is the awareness of muscle activation, awareness of muscle tension, as well as awareness of forces acting upon the muscles. Muscles, bone, ligaments, tendons, and fascia are all interconnected, and the sensing of the forces transmitted through these structures is included in this body awareness. It is one component of interoception, the collection of senses perceiving the internal state of the

body. These internal sensations also include the sensing of heartbeat, breathing, internal pain, hunger, satiation, body temperature, among many other things, and is generally described as sensing how one feels, the sense of self.

How do we cultivate body awareness in tai chi? Qigong exercises, where the mind follows specific paths along the body in coordination with breathing, can be thought of as an interoception exercise, connecting the brain to different parts of the body. A sense of tension release or relaxation can be felt where the mind goes. This is the sensation of qi flow.

Another exercise for improving body awareness is the *wuji* stance (無極勢), where one stands in an upright posture and gradually relaxes the muscles until the body starts to sway gently. The body is an inverted pendulum and internal processes kick in to prevent the body from falling over. Different patterns of involuntary muscle activation can be observed, sometimes in the abdomen, sometimes in the calves, sometimes in the glutes. The ability to relax the muscles to achieve this motion, the discipline to allow the body's autonomous systems to manage balance without conscious interference, and the ability to observe the resulting muscle activations are key goals of this exercise. The *wuji* stance is often practiced just prior to playing a tai chi form, as a preparatory exercise for the mind and body.

In figure skating, there are a number of elements that work best when the central longitudinal axis (CLA) is lined up with the dynamic plumb line (the imaginary line that runs through the skater's center of mass and the skating blade's contact point on the ice). This alignment allows rotation around the CLA without disturbing the intended movement of the blade over the ice. Oftentimes, skaters will jiggle up and down just prior to such an element to ensure proper alignment. When the spine is not properly aligned, the jiggling motion amplifies the telltale lateral forces on the spine, allowing the skater to make final adjustments prior to performing the element. When the spine is properly aligned, the forces flow straight down the spine, with no sideways pull. Skaters with good body awareness have less need for this jiggling motion.

Body awareness is also used to achieve flow, an important aspect of artistic performance in figure skating and other movement arts. Without body parts talking to each other, achieved through body awareness, the performance comes across as being merely technical and not artistic. The late Ricky Harris, famed figure skating choreographer, explained that "the concentration of moving an imagined 'energy ball' to different parts of your body will help you to move in ways that you may not have imagined before." This concept is the same as moving with *qi* and *jing* in tai chi.

To conclude, in tai chi, figure skating, and many sports and movement arts, body awareness can help one achieve a higher level of performance and enjoyment of one's activities.

With Warmest Regards,

Vincent Chun



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