



Warm greetings!

I am writing this newsletter from the Red Sea resort of Hurghada where I am vacationing with my wife Barbara. I'd like to thank my fellow instructor, Lai Lai Sheung, for substitute teaching my tai chi classes in my absence. She has also been helpful in teaching beginning students while I teach tai chi principles to more experienced students.

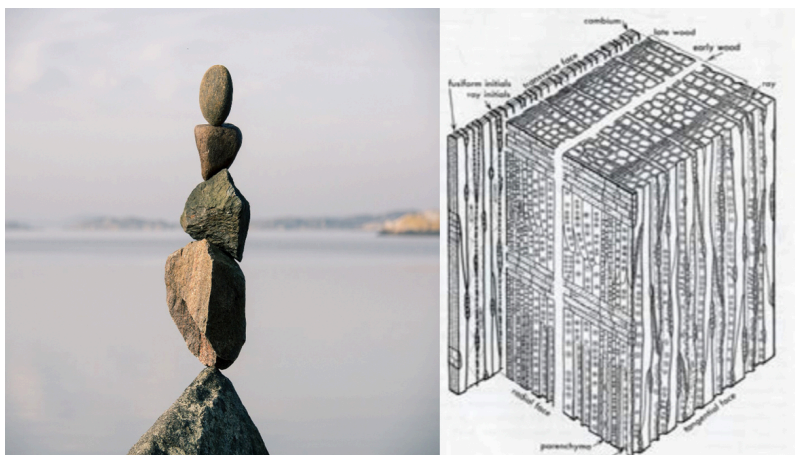
In my recent travels, I have had the opportunity to practice tai chi on a cruise ship and on a beach, both of which present enjoyable challenges to maintaining

balance. I have some thoughts on the topic, which I share below.

Insight Sharing - Balancing, Rooting, and Commanding the Ice

In this issue, I discuss the difference between balancing and rooting. While most people strive to remain balanced, i.e., not fall, few people understand what it means to be rooted. A tall vase is balanced; however, when pushed, it will topple over. A tree, on the other hand, is rooted; when pushed, it stays standing. Thus, rooting can be described as staying balanced even under unexpected disturbance forces. Performing tai chi on a rocking boat or on shifting sands requires one to practice rooting, not just balancing.

In a typical upright posture, the act of balancing is often thought of in terms of the body stack. From feet to head, each body section is stacked upon the one underneath to ensure proper alignment. The stacked stones in the left figure is a visual analogy. Thus, the brain is cued to move body parts horizontally, either forward and back or left and right, to maintain balance. While not quite as precarious as the stacked stones in the figure, a tai chi practitioner or figure skater who is merely balanced is still vulnerable to falling when pushed or bumped into.



In rooting, the emphasis is on the longitudinal connections between the body stack elements. A useful imagery is that of the internal structure of a tree. The figure on the right shows fibrous structures that run vertically within a typical plant stem or tree trunk. This is what allows the tree to withstand disturbances and stay upright. A sideways force on the tree trunk will generate tensile forces in the fibrous structure which resists the external force and maintains the tree's upright posture. Likewise, the tai chi practitioner pandiculates their spine (pulling the spine taut like a string, according to Dr. Paul Lam) and sinks their weight into the feet. The movement impulse is downward. A useful way of cuing the brain is to imagine pressing downward to make footprints in the sand. This activates the muscles in the middle control zone and directs the body's weight toward the center of each foot (imagine uniform pressure to make a footprint of even depth).

“Commanding the ice” in skating is similar to rooting in tai chi. It is a term coined by elite skating coach Cecily Morrow. It connotes a high degree of control and great ease of movement that a skater has over their movements on the ice. Cecily recounted a situation where a skater bumped into her while she was skating along. She stayed upright while the other skater bounced off and fell. In the upright single foot gliding posture, the spine and arms are stretched taut and the movement impulse is that of pushing downward, sinking the skater’s weight onto the contact point between the skate blade and the ice. This automatically aligns the body stack one on top of each other while also making the body structure firm and robust against external disturbances, such as choppy ice.

To conclude, the natural progression, whether in Tai chi or figure skating, is to first develop the body awareness skills that allow one to sense the position of the body stack elements, and then develop the skills to sink one’s weight in tai chi or push downwards in skating. Using imagery to cue the brain is also helpful.

With Warmest Regards,

Vincent Chun, PhD

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