



Tai Chi is an ancient Chinese practice that has the potential to rejuvenate the entire body and even alleviate symptoms of normal aging and chronic illnesses. Tai Chi is most effective when practiced daily and partnered with a healthy, holistic lifestyle. We ask that you try to follow these 4 rules:

1. Know yourself.
2. Always do your best.
3. Each time make a little bit of progress.
4. Do NOT overdo it!

While Tai Chi has amazing health benefits, it is also a difficult practice. There is a lot to learn, especially for a beginner. Try not to allow yourself to become frustrated at having to learn so many principles, postures, positions, and sayings - you don't need to learn these things all at once. Something that may seem completely contradictory as you begin Tai Chi practice will suddenly be made clear after a few months of daily practice. Always remember, it's ok - and even encouraged - that you ask for clarification on anything that doesn't make sense to you.

Helpful Hints:

What is chi, and how does it move? Your chi is your body's personal energy and is stored in the body in (one of the three) **dan tian(s)**. The lower **dan tian** is the one we will primarily work with and is located about three finger-widths below the navel, and about two in, although the exact location varies person to person. In a perfectly healthy person, the chi accumulates in the dan tian, then flows throughout the body along energetic meridians with no restrictions or blockages and contributes to their good health. In many people, however, the chi does not flow smoothly, and encounters blockages it cannot get by. (Think about a painful shoulder that makes it difficult to lift the arm, for example.) Tai chi teaches you to *know yourself*, and daily practice allows your chi to flow unrestricted throughout your body.

What does “being grounded” mean? Simply put, being grounded means being connected to the Earth's energy, or bio-electric field. There are numerous health benefits to being grounded, including reduced inflammation and pain, mood stability, improved immune function, protection from harmful electromagnetic frequencies, and much more.

Imagining your feet as tree roots that reach deep into the ground can be useful to feel grounded. There is a very useful standing meditation posture that quickly allows people to feel grounded, and to feel their chi. Stand in Horse Riding Stance with your arms to your sides, but open so as not to restrict the flow of chi. Imagine an ocean wave is behind you, and you are holding it back – if you can *feel* the water swirling against your legs, you'll automatically ground strongly. When you feel the tingle in your arms and hands, you are feeling your chi moving. It is also important to note that when the Earth's energy enters your body, it twines and twists into your legs – imagine a slow-motion image of a flower opening its petals in a spiral – that's how chi moves within your body. The internal motion of the chi is matched by the outward twisting and twining done in tai chi practice.

Horse Riding Stance is a common stance in tai chi and is seen in the Bear warm-up exercise. Stand with feet roughly shoulder-width apart, knees slightly bent. Keep your feet grounded, and imagine a string lifting the head top upward. Keep your spine straight and tuck your coccyx bone underneath as if you're preparing to sit down, and you're in Horse Riding Stance. From this stance, shifting your weight in different ways can bring you to a variety of postures. Remember that in tai chi, we're very rarely double-weighted (our weight evenly on both legs). When doing warm-ups in Horse Riding Stance, the weight is often shifted from leg to leg, even if that shift isn't apparent in everyone.

Bow and Arrow Stance is another common stance, and appears both in Warm-Ups, and in the Single Whip posture. Start in Horse Riding Stance, and shift all weight to one leg, allowing the feeling of that foot to sink into the floor. Once the weighted leg feels as though it has sunk into the floor, that allows the “empty” leg to come up and step directly forward. Shift your weight to the forward leg, making sure that when you bend the forward leg to accept the weight that your knee does NOT go beyond your toes – if it does, widen your stance a bit to avoid hurting the knee joint. You want the toes of the forward leg to point straight ahead, and the toes of the back foot point at a 45-degree angle. To get back to Horse Riding Stance from here, shift all your weight to your back foot, and allow that foot to sink into the floor – this will let your empty forward foot come back so you're in Horse Riding Stance again. You'll be able to shift your weight back and forth easily in Bow and Arrow Stance, but try not to allow your waist to rise and lower as you do so. This is more difficult than it may seem, but with daily practice your flexibility will increase, making it easier.

Embryonic, or reverse, breathing is a type of breathing we practice. This type of breathing is called reverse breathing because it is the opposite of the way we typically breath now; it is called embryonic breathing because it was the way you "breathed" when you were a developing embryo in the womb. This type of breathing is thought to reset and rejuvenate the entire body, according to Tai Chi philosophy.

Typically, when we take air in, our stomach swells; it sinks back in as we release the air. In reverse breathing, we do just the opposite. When we draw in a long, slow, fine breath (thru the nose), we gently pull our stomach in. When we let the air out, we let

our stomach relax back out. The goal of all Tai Chi breathing is one long, continuous breath - "the breath going in becomes the breath going out, becomes the breath going in..."

Also, please note that the reverse breathing method we practice can be done anywhere, at any time. The more breaths you take while concentrating on pulling your stomach in as you draw air in to compress your dan tian, the better you'll feel for a variety of reasons. You don't need to add arm movements, or even be standing while doing so. In fact, reverse breathing can be a useful method of relieving stress in daily situations and everyday life.

The power of visualization and imagination... In Tai Chi, we use imagination a lot. Within the first 10 minutes of class, we've already held back the ocean's powerful waves to ground ourselves, and moved our chi around our bodies. So now I'll let everyone in on a secret... If you don't "have time" to practice Tai Chi, imagining yourself doing so is almost as good as actually practicing. Obviously, you'll get more benefits if you're up, moving, and grounded. But especially when it comes to practicing the sequence of movements, imagining yourself doing it while standing on a stage can be a helpful training method.

Assorted tai chi principles and explanations

"Yin and Yang", or empty and full. Also referred to as the Tai Chi diagram, it represents the concept of dualism. The white side is said to represent the male/sun/fire/daylight, while the black represents the female/moon/water/night; the dots within each side symbolize how all things are interconnected. The curved line through the middle denotes the constant movement of these energies.

The practical aspect of this is that Tai Chi is about the continual movement of chi within the body. The usual application of this is that very rarely are you double-weighted; the majority of your weight is on either the right *or* left leg or is transitioning between the two.

"The head is suspended on a string." Posture plays an important part in allowing chi to flow unrestricted. As soon as you imagine a string (of pearls is a nice image) attached at the top of your head, gently pulling you up towards Heaven, you can feel your back and neck open.

"Use softness. Relax into the postures." In almost all exercise classes except tai chi, you build muscle by using strength and force. In tai chi, we recognize that true strength comes from softness and relaxing into the postures. Only when we relax our shoulders can chi flow unrestricted down the arms for example, even if the arms are extended. The strength comes from being grounded and relaxed, and ready for anything.

“All movements come from the turning of the waist, even if it’s an internal movement”. In time, all movement becomes directed by the turning of the waist since this is where the dan tian is located. This is especially true in the Bears warm-up exercise – the arms come up to hit the waist because of an internal movement of the waist combined with shifting your weight – not because you are turning your waist to move your arms to make them hit your waist. In time, the chi directs the movements of the body.

“The waist must stay level, not raise and lower”. To practice tai chi properly, you must keep your body in structure. Part of that structure is keeping the waist at an even level, and not raising or lowering the waist even when postures change. This is difficult, and is something that comes in time, but beginners should be aware of it.

“Move as if in water or honey”. Feeling the air you move thru as water or honey is a great training method. You slow down when you feel the weight of the air moving against your body and relax into the postures.

“Match the joints together”. In practicing tai chi, we make the entire body communicate with all other parts – the tendons, muscles, nerves, and chi, must all work together to support the movements of the body. By matching all of the paired joints – the ankles, knees, hips, wrists, elbows, shoulders, and including the eyes, this is made easier with practice.