

# **Beginners Guide to the Development of Internal Feeling in Tai Chi**

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The following is not definitive – just some observations on the journey. Readers may recognise some of them and hopefully will be encouraged in looking for their own internal feeling. We each bring our differences to our practice and each of us takes different things from it - so will change and develop differently. One thing does seem clear however – this is an important part of Tai Chi – without it we are simply following the moves of others, copying what we are told. With internal feeling we are able to take control of our own development and my suspicion is that ultimately, rather than this complicated list, it all just gets brought together in the everyday experience of living in your own body, with awareness of what is going on.

So to anyone starting out on the journey of Tai Chi – I hope this helps:

## **The practice**

Choreography - gives us a skeleton of movement on which we can build our study. Slow practice enables us to stretch these movements out so as to study how our body feels when moving.

Solo practice - provides the space to study ourselves. Standing or static posture practice is a very slow version of this.

By improving the body mechanics of posture and movement we can improve our balance and reduce the antagonistic action of muscle groups allowing ourselves to feel the slight changes in tensions more easily.

Partner work - in a spirit of co-operation - gives us the opportunity to study others and ourselves. i.e. to feel how they behave and how we behave in relation to them. It also provides the opportunity for overt feedback from the partner, which we can then compare with our internal experience.

Technique – by study of small elements of choreography we come to understand just how detailed the movement can be and how to make changes and why.

Understanding of principles, use of models, visualisation, metaphors etc., provide an intellectually and emotionally rational platform to support and guide development from the “here” that we understand to “there” which we as yet do not. A way of consciously connecting to our feeling of what is going on in our body and of our interactions with others.

Use of external yardsticks – by measuring ourselves from time to time against known external experiences we can measure our development, e.g. changes in sporting abilities, changes in physical abilities, changes in relationship behaviours. By comparing internal feelings now with correctly remembered feelings we can relate internal changes to external performance.

Repetition – allows us to become comfortable with particular movements and to compare the feelings of what is happening inside from one repetition to the next so that we can make positive changes. Repetition also provides the work that creates change.

Recognition of body feelings – ultimately the only way we can tell in detail what is going on inside us is to feel it happening. This includes physical, emotionally related and externally stimulated internal events.

Standing and slow practice, alone or in partnership, provides the body with weight bearing exercise that promotes changes in the muscle performance and increase in bone density. These changes contribute to a more fluid feel to the body.

“Hands on” corrections are a major factor in developing internal feeling. Soft external corrections allow the body to relax into “natural” alignment; this allows comparison between where we are and where we are headed. By remembering the differences in internal feeling we can make positive improvements.

Cultivating a calm body – by relaxing of tensions we can more easily recognise the internal movements or other activities and eliminate the unwanted ones, which interfere with fluidity. This reduces background static noise going on in the body permitting smoother operation and allowing us to notice when the body is working as we want, e.g. in segmental movement.

Cultivating a calm mind and emotions removes any interference they may generate, e.g. unwanted tensions or imposed behavioural patterns, thus allowing the integrated self to operate optimally.

Experiencing a wide range of other bodies – from world class to beginner, fit to unfit, small to large, hard to soft, male to female, young to old. This shows us what is possible and allows us to experience how each feels and how we feel in that relationship. We can literally feel where we come in the spectrum.

Changes – come about in the body leading to an improved ability to listen to the sensations occurring in the body and improvements in our ability to move fluidly and with power. Coupled with physiological changes, which enable us to use the body in a much more finely poised and balanced manner.

Changes in the makeup and operation of our bodies – which muscles and other soft tissues operate, how, when, and why. Ultimately also changing the hard tissues, as well as the state and operation of the joints. Leading to a healthier, stronger more resilient physical structure.

Changes in the conscious and sub-conscious firmware/software – our primal and intellectual/emotional control systems - our programming. Changing our psychological balance. Leading to changes in the makeup of the complete bodymind.

Tai Chi is known as:

“The art of awareness” also “The art of change”

Tai-Chi = everything all together = the supreme ultimate principle – comprising the totality of all principles.

Chuan = boxing = a very wide term beyond simple western boxing, taking in all forms of arts concerned with physical conflict.

Tai Chi Chuan = Supreme ultimate art of physical conflict – in the sense of a way of being, of dealing with physical conflict, that is derived from the basic principles by which life works.

### **The feelings**

When you focus on an area of your body – what do you feel?

When you scan your body what are the feelings you become aware of?

Are there muscles or joints that are tight, loose, unbalanced?

Can you stand still for 10 minutes without back pain?

Do your shoulders feel stiff?

Do you get a tingling/nagging/chattering sense anywhere in your body?

When you move can you feel the individual parts operating? The foot, ankle, calf, knee, thigh muscles, the hip joint, the abdomen, the chest muscles, the back, the shoulder, the upper arm, elbow, forearm, wrist and fingers? Any individual muscles or joints?

When you move to pick something from a shelf does it feel like a few individual movements (leg, arm, hand) or lots of small movements all synchronised together in a single fluid movement?

Do you have pain anywhere that goes away when you focus on the area and relax it with an outbreath?

What does it feel like when “internal feeling” is developed?

Solid, calm, connected, centred, grounded, light, poised, relaxed, easy, fluid, balanced, open, quiet, sensitive, aware?

Perhaps you can you feel the connection of muscles through the body from foot to hand?

When you push something with your hand, can you feel the linkage to the ground through your body?

Can you feel the stretching of muscles as you move?

When you move your waist, can you feel your limbs being pulled?

Can you feel the opening and closing of joints, of the shoulders, of the chest?

When you move, perhaps you can feel the movement causing you to breathe in and out?

Is your head poised on your spine?

Maybe you can feel your spine moving differently over its whole length – each vertebrae moving individually but linked?

Do you feel the weight of your arms on your shoulders and of your body on your legs?

When you are pushed or bumped unexpectedly in the street you may keep your balance better and barely even notice.

When you are dancing you may lead more positively and follow more closely.

All these and more - the consensus seems to be that it is different for everyone – but that you will recognise it when you have it!

### **Some Useful Concepts re feeling in Tai Chi**

Micro Movements – the use of tiny, almost imperceptible, low energy movements in exercises to aid in relaxation and balance.

Spontaneous movement - change or development

- the ability to move in a new way, the experience of suddenly finding a body movement or range of movement that did not previously exist. Often a “letting go” so that a movement that was difficult or not possible before, becomes soft and easy to achieve.

Almost-movement – the use of pre-movement visualisation to create a state of “being about to move” but not quite doing so. (Particularly from my teacher Karel Koskuba)

Connection – feeling of linkage between separated parts of the body. The linkage being felt through the intervening parts, .e.g. from abdomen to hand, also feeling of a peng pathway from any part of the body to the ground.

And finally –

- do please practice your Tai chi exercises and form on a daily basis.
- notice your body and emotional feelings during your normal activities such as walking down the street or standing in the queue at the supermarket.
- and use a Tai Chi Diary to write down what you notice – use whatever format is comfortable.
- feedback what you learn to develop your practice and movement generally
- remember that the purpose of looking inward is to connect yourself better to the outside world.

Good luck and enjoy!

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