

## Levels of exercise – why not go all out?

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It is strange to many of us to consider that we might not push ourselves hard in our exercise – after all were we not exhorted to do so for many years at school and elsewhere? But once we come to regard exercise as developing a skill – as well as aiding cardio-vascular fitness – then we start to find that bigger, faster and harder are not the way forward. Essentially we are learning a skill which requires hard work, delicacy, care and application – we can only do that with careful attention to detail – observing our movement and making subtle changes which can modify habitual body usage.

Consequently in Tai Chi we practice our exercises and our mental approach so as to take advantage of both large and small movements.

- Large slow movements initially allow us to pattern the choreography
- Small slow movements enable us to relax in movement and feel what is going on in our own body
- Relaxed fast movement allows us to develop flow and connection when coupled with the other two
- Fast movements also show us where flow and connection break down

Vertical posture, with poise and balance, takes the tension out of our bodies while creating advantageous mechanical angles of leverage, it also enables enhanced sensitivity and connection so that we can move more as a unit and in a more relaxed way - and ultimately more powerfully.

Sensitivity – such as in feeling the floor enables more grounded posture. Slow delicate movement enables us to feel our environment while also feeling ones' own internal skeletal/muscular movement as various body parts rotate, slide, twist and stretch or contract. In turn this enables us to develop our balance and control more delicately and subtly.

We find that the dynamic extended activity we have been used to thinking of actually works against us, since the tension and sheer amount of activity generates internal “noise” that covers up much of what we would otherwise become aware of – once we become internally quiet we can start to notice what is going on inside our bodies so that we can use this in developing our way of moving.

This is particularly valid in the case of older or less mobile practitioners where “pushing” ourselves or making excessive movements can actually be detrimental – not only does such movement risk damage – but it is also likely to get in the way of being able to feel and notice what is going on. The degree of movement therefore should start small and relaxed increasing as the body becomes comfortable with the movement – so that the comfort zone is gradually widened.

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