

Taiji Notes

By Abhayamati

2. The importance of structure

Chi is energy. In Taiji we learn both how to cultivate chi in the body and to establish the structure through which the chi can pass. To illustrate this, consider for a moment the humble garden hose. If there is a kink or blockage in the hose, the water cannot pass through. But when the hose has no kinks or blockages, even a small amount of water can pass through – and as we turn the tap the flow of water increases. So, in Taiji it is vitally important that we first pay close attention to our physical structure. Otherwise, we will be cultivating energy but it will not be able to pass freely through the body.

Structure in Taiji is based on a few simple physical principles. Firstly, we cultivate a sense of uprightness. We pay particular attention to the contact of the feet against the floor. The weight must be equally distributed over the whole foot; so that the toes, balls of the foot, heels and outside edge are all in full contact with the floor. Look at the soles of your shoes; you will notice that they do not wear away equally over the whole foot; this reveals our habitual ways of standing and walking. For the first few years of doing Taiji, I wore Taiji shoes (Chinese slippers). The cloth bottoms of the shoes wear away such that an impression of your foot is left on the bottom of the sole. Mine would wear away mostly in the heel, less around the ball of the foot and a little around the big toe: so I learnt my habit of leaning backwards and of gripping slightly with my big toe to stop me falling over! These habits take time to relearn, but by the time I threw away my second pair the wearing on the sole was even over the whole foot!

Next, we establish a sense of the line of central equilibrium. This is an imaginary line running from the crown of the head, down the centre of the body, through a meridian point half way between the groin and the anus. In the up and down movement (or 'preparation exercise') the line of central equilibrium runs down beneath the heels. In the exercises and the form, the line of central equilibrium stays upright. To attain this, our hip joints must be relaxed and seated. There must be no tilting in the hips. If the hips are tilted, the whole body leans and our alignment is off. The joints of the hips form a 'V' shape, what we call the 'central plate'. We can do our exercises with our palms face up in the 'V' of the central plate to see if it tips. For most of us, the hips are tight; so we must use exercises such as number one exercise to open and loosen the hip joints.

Now, we must have a sense of lightness in our structure. To do this, we imagine that we are lifted up from an invisible thread attached to the top of our heads. That way the spine feels as if it is hanging, as the Chinese say, like a string of pearls: which is a beautiful and apt image for uprightness without rigidity. This sense of being lifted allows us to gently tuck in the chin to release the neck and to drop the shoulders. Forcing in the chin only compresses the neck and tenses the chest. Next, we soften the chest. The chest must not feel lifted as if standing to attention, but dropped and relaxed; the Chinese say 'hollowed' but not in the sense that there is a rounding of the shoulders. The shoulders are not lifted but are dropped into their joints, the belly is soft and relaxed and the knees are slightly bent. Stand in this way for just a couple of minutes and you will feel a sense of aliveness, as if you were able to move easily in any direction.