

9 BASIC TAIJI PRINCIPLES For Beginners

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There are principles of posture, movement, intention and application. The fundamental principles are shared by every traditional form of Taiji. The majority of the principles can be classified into 4 categories: 1) posture 2) movement 3) intention 4) application. They must be passed down by teachers and mastered by students. When we practice Taiji, our primary concentration is on the principles. One principle properly understood can correct every technique. There is a saying that “one principle is worth a thousand techniques”.

The principles are so fundamental to understanding Taiji that we can say that anyone who teaches without a thorough understanding of the principles is just cheating his students. A good teacher should be able to both explain each principle clearly and simply to the student and also be able to demonstrate the understanding in both form and application. Naturally, there are levels of understanding. Taiji is the principles and the principles are Taiji.

The principles contain the accumulated wisdom of the past Masters. They have been taught and followed from generation to generation. Not only do they clearly set out the requirements of Taiji, but they also provide guideposts to achievement. When practicing Taiji, the practitioner should be consciously trying to apply the correct principles. Eventually the principles and movement become the same.

The principles of Taiji range from easy to difficult and from basic to advanced. Some of the principles make no sense until one has made a certain amount of achievement. Some principles can be understood one way as a beginner and another way as one becomes more accomplished. There are also different ways of translating the principles from the more open-ended Chinese pictographs and words into our own phonetic language requiring specific and precise meanings. For my own beginning students, I ask them to be cognizant of at least 9 basic principles:

Number one “**Relax**”, number two “**Sink**” and number three “**Go Slow**” are probably the three most important. As simple as they sound, even after more than 40 years of practice I am still working to improve in these three important areas of practice.

Number four, “**Body Straight**”, refers to the importance of maintaining vertical alignment and structure. It involves raising the head as if balancing a book on top and tucking the tailbone under the torso in order to straighten the lower back curve. This principle seeks to correct the tendency of beginners to lean back or forward at the waist or from side to side at the waist. At a more advanced level it seeks to encourage the most advantageous posture for conveying the rooted ground strength up through the body from the feet to the hands in the most efficient body pathway. Later the principle of “Body Straight” will be understood as “**Body Aligned**”.

Number five, “Clearly Differentiate/**Distinguish Yin from Yang**”. For the beginner, this principle requires that the practitioner know which is the lead hand/arm and which hand/arm

is the complimentary hand. Also for the beginner, this involves knowing which leg the weight is on. The cardinal sins of Taiji are stiffness and double weightedness. Just like in riding a bicycle, one must consciously and intentionally push down with one foot and then the other. Trying to push down with both will get one nowhere. Be sure to differentiate and distinguish between the substantial/active (Yang) and the insubstantial/complimentary (Yin) aspects of the right limb and the left limb. Later this principle will be applied to every part of the body and aspects of application.

Number six, “When One Part Moves **Every Part Moves**” and “All the Parts are Connected”. No part of the body moves unless every other part of the body moves together. Movement is integrated rather than isolated when practicing Taiji. To raise a hand, the whole body must also raise up as well. The movement always starts from the ground up: from the foot to the leg, to the waist, to the spine, to the arms and then finally to the hand. In between movements, the direction is the opposite in order to bring the weight and energy back to the body’s foundation connection of our feet to the ground.

Number seven, “All Move ment is Directed by the **Waist**”. The waist refers to the entire abdominal and back area between the hips and ribs. Today this area is referred to as the “core” in many Western exercise systems. It also includes what is referred to in Chinese as the tan tien. It contains many of the body’s largest and strongest muscle groupings. Think of all the home runs hit by Mark McGwire and Barry Bonds, or the long drives of Tiger Woods, or the devastating serves of the Williams sisters in tennis, or the hook punches of Mike Tyson. They all involve moving the waist first and then the arms follow. Turning and sinking the waist one way stores power and creates neutralization while turning, shifting and rising releases power. The waist also unifies and connects the upper body with the lower body so the whole body can move as a unified whole.

Number eight “Every Movement **All the Way**”. The Taiji classics admonish to “first seek expansion”. By making movements bigger and longer we extend the body joints and release tension which can build up in the joints. Expansion also helps to connect the different body parts together. It provides both exercise and relaxation. However, if this principle is balanced with the first principle (relax). Therefore, make movements only as big and as strong as you can without feeling pain or unsteadiness. The best way to practice these principles is simply by practicing the form regularly. As20time goes on different principles will become clearer with regular practice. The Masters have assured us that proper practice will lead to progress.

Number nine “Seek **smooth, continuous, circular** movement”. Taiji movement always has a unique appearance, “flowing like a mighty river”. At the first level a beginner seeks to learn the individual movements with proper posture and sequencing. At the next level, the student seeks to link the body’s movements in each posture and to link the movements together in the form. Smoothness, circularity and continuousness are the qualities most persons admire when seeing Taiji performed correctly. Sometimes you will be working on one principle at a time for awhile and then later progress onto another. It would be great to be able to do them all well and in time anybody can with proper practice. Work on the ones you are comfortable with. When you are done with these there are plenty of others. The nine I have chosen primarily for beginners. However, until one makes progress in these there is no point in going beyond. These are foundation principles. Think of them as advice from the great, past Masters echoing down the ages directly to you.

The Taiji classics stress the importance of using the mind to lead the body. Only when the mind and body are in sync can we be said to be actually practicing Taiji. Think of the principles as a way of uniting mind and body in movement. They give us a point of view as well as a challenge. At very last, mindful practice will dispel distractions and return our attention inward. At best proper practice in accord with the principles will offer the greatest potential for improved health and performance.