

T'ai Chi Ch'uan

Body Structure

The structure of the body plays a key role in being able to correctly perform the movements in Tai Chi. Tai Chi relies on smoothly flowing, circular movements, whether you are using it as a martial art or a meditational exercise. Improper body alignment will result in loss of control (swaying, tipping, losing balance) which will reduce the effectiveness of the chi flow in the body.

Correct body structure starts in the feet. They must always be fully relaxed while firmly attached to the ground. This is your connection with the earth, one of the sources of clean, fresh chi that can be utilized by the body. A flimsy connection will reduce the amount of chi that can be absorbed or channeled. To gain a good connection pay close attention to how the feet contact the ground. You should feel as though the entire base of the foot, all the way around the edge, is touching the ground. If you feel that only the ball or heel is contacting then you do not have a good contact and you must study how to restore the contact. This will be true all through the movements, with the exception of spins and turns.

The next part of body structure is the ankles. The ankles must be relaxed at all times. Any tension in the ankles will result in a constriction which will block or slow down the flow of chi into the body. Keeping the ankles relaxed allows you to adjust your body in relation to your feet which allows your feet to remain grounded

Moving up to the knees they must maintain their orientation to the feet while being relaxed. The knees need to remain over the feet and not be allowed to drop inside or outside of the feet. This is very important, not only to your form, but also to your health. You can seriously injure your knees by allowing them to drop inside your feet as this places a large amount of torque on the knee which it is not designed to handle. Also, by placing torque on the knees you will be blocking the flow of chi through that area.

To keep the knees over the feet you must allow the perineum to open. As you are shifting your weight forward you must allow the back knee to remain over the back foot while the forward knee is pushing towards the forward foot. This will result in an expansion of the thighs and will help to open the chi channels in the legs.

The hips should always face in the direction of the forward toe. Turning the hips away from the forward toe will result in twisting the knees.

The hips and waist are separate structures of the body and can move independently. When you need to turn keep the hips facing the forward toe and turn the waist. If the waist is stiff then practice some of the repetitive waist stretching exercises to help loosen the waist. Turning the waist will stretch the Ming Man point on the lower back which will increase the chi flow to this area.

The back needs to remain straight and perpendicular to the floor. Any bending in the back will move your center of gravity and result in loss of stability.

To keep the base of the back straight allow the sacrum to rotate down and forward. Be careful not to rotate the hips down as this will result in the back being curved. The tuck of the sacrum should be down and towards the floor to a point just in front of the feet. Be aware that this is not a large movement. Just tuck the sacrum until it points to the floor.

While the spine is straight allow the shoulders to rotate slightly forward creating a slight dip or inward curve in the chest at the sternum. This will result in a slight amount of pressure on the thymus gland which will result in an increase in energy. Do not exaggerate the rounding - it should be slight but present.

Maintain the shoulders over the hips. If the shoulders are not over the hips you will be tilted and you will not be able to relax fully.

The shoulders, elbows and wrists must remain relaxed to allow proper chi flow to the hands. In the standing position allow the elbows to rotate slightly out and forward. This will help to create the rounding of the back and will also open the armpits and help to open the shoulder joints.

The fingers should be slightly extended, but not fully straightened. Focus your mind on the fingertips and let them grow longer. This will open the palm and the finger joints and fill the arms and hands with energy.

The neck must remain straight and relaxed to prevent a chi blockage. A stiff neck will prevent the chi that is accumulated in the head from draining to the lower Tan Tien, a highly undesirable position.

The crown of the head must point up so that the whole body can feel as if suspended. To accomplish this the chin must be tucked in, but ever so lightly. Exaggeration of this tuck will result in tension in the neck and blockage of the chi flow.

Be aware that while you need to focus your mind in all of the above locations you must also focus on maintaining full relaxation of all of the muscles. At first this will be difficult for as soon as your mind moves from one location to another your body will "forget" to maintain the proper alignment. This can only be corrected by repeated and mindful practice. Begin by working on each part separately and focusing on the feeling your body has as each part is placed in the correct position. Hold the position and allow the body to memorize the correct position and then move on to the next part of the body. Continue until the body understands all of the parts and then work on linking multiple parts together. You will have to keep going back and forth between practice and check, practice and check before you will be able to maintain the correct body structure.

With the body in proper physical structure there is one other change that needs to be accomplished - the opening of the joints throughout the body. One way to accomplish this is to focus your mind on the extremities growing away from each other. Do not do this as a physical exercise - you should not feel or see a physical stretching of the body. Rather, as the joints open you should have the sense that the joints are relaxing open, not being stretched open. Focus on the following extremity combinations:

Simple combinations - single joints

- Crown of the head and the shoulders to open the neck
- Shoulders and sacrum to open the back
- Neck and elbows to open the shoulders
- Shoulders and wrists to open the elbows
- Elbows and palms to open the wrists
- Wrists and fingertips to open the hands

More complex combinations - multiple joints

- Crown of the head and the sacrum to open the back and neck
- Shoulder and tips of the fingers to open the arms and hands
- Feet and waist to open the hips, knees and ankles
- Crown of the head and the feet to open the neck, back, waist, hip, knees and ankles

It is best to practice opening the joints as a standing meditation practice. As with the practice of learning the correct body structure you will find that you will have to take your time to learn to open the joints. Begin your practice with opening the spine. You can start with each vertebrae and open them one at a time and then work on holding the entire spine open. After you are comfortable with that then add the neck. One visualization that helps with this is to focus on water flowing from the tan tien to the sacrum and out the legs to the earth while at the same time focus on fire flowing from the tan tien to the crown of the head and out to the sky. If this is difficult then focus just on the water flowing aspect. Besides helping to learn to open the back this by itself will help to ground you and develop your rooting ability. As you become more comfortable with opening the back you can extend your study to the remaining joints and later to the practice to the movements of the form.

One thing to note on the opening of the joints is to make sure you are clear on the direction the joints open. In particular the shoulder joint opens towards the sides of the body, not towards the front, back or the ground.

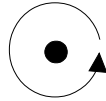
The classics say:

The motion should be rooted in the feet,
released through the legs,
controlled by the waist,
and manifested through the fingers.

If the timing and position are not correct,
the body becomes disordered,
and the defect must be sought in the legs and waist.¹

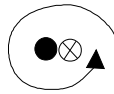
¹The Essence of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, The Literary Tradition by Lo/Inn, Amacker/Foe

If you are having problems with your form you need to look at what the legs and waist are doing. Remember to treat the body as if you are pivoting about your center. In this case we are referring to the center that extends from the crown of the head down through the spine to the sacrum and not the center as in tan tien.



U s i n g t h e c e n t e r o f t h e
b o d y a s a n a x l e

Allowing the center to move or translate through space will result in loss of balance or a feeling of discomfort or uneasiness with the movement. This is shown in the diagram below where the original center is shown as the circle with the x and the final position of the center is shown as the black circle. As a result of the center shifting the circle has lost its symmetry and the body will lose its balance.



S h i f t i n g t h e c e n t e r o f t h e
b o d y w h e n t u r n i n g

You also need to pay attention to the difference between the waist and the hips. The hips should maintain their relationship with the forward toe and face in that direction. The waist however is free to turn away from the forward toe and should be used when the body needs to be turned. Turning the waist and not the hips will ensure that the knees are maintained in correct position and that the center of gravity of the lower body does not move. This coupled with turning the waist as if the center is a rod running from the crown of the head to the perineum will ensure that the turning of the upper body does not affect the center of gravity.