



Linda's T'ai Chi Weekly Handout

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Imagery in T'ai Chi

Imagery is essential to performing T'ai Chi as it connects you the performer to nature and the natural world. Being grounded and focused allows the mind, body and spirit to become "one." By becoming "one", we can achieve the sense of tranquility, softness, continuity of motion and fully embrace our connection to the universe.

Visualization and Imagery are different. Visualization is any technique for creating images, diagrams, or animations to communicate a message. Imagery uses all of our senses.

Modern research

Lao Tzu says in the Tao te Ching 'Without stepping out the door, you can know the world, Without looking through the window, you can see Heaven's Way" (the further you travel, the less you know.) Lao Tzu was an ancient philosopher who lived in the sixth century BCE. Now, some believe he never really existed; more of a legendary figure.

In a modern scientific equivalent, Harvard neuroscientist, Steven Kosslyn, has demonstrated that when people imagine things, the parts of their brains involved with the senses they are using in their imagining become active. When people imagine moving, the areas of the prefrontal motor cortex that instruct the body to move become active. The brain therefore, cannot easily distinguish between actually doing T'ai Chi forms and imagining doing T'ai Chi forms. The same happens when reading a book. The brain does not differentiate reading, watching a movie or experiencing it.

How to use imagery in your T'ai Chi practice

The first step in using imagery effectively is relaxation. Lao Tzu said 'Empty yourself of everything, return to the source of stillness.' This is a good description of relaxation. There are many relaxation techniques to try. To begin deep relaxation, close your eyes and begin to breathe using the diaphragm or belly. As you inhale, allow the belly (diaphragm) to naturally expand. As you exhale, draw the belly back in. This is called diaphragm or dantian breathing in qi gong and T'ai Chi practice. Dantian, or tan t'ien is

loosely translated as "elixir field", "sea of qi" (chi), or simply "energy center". Dantian are the "qi focus flow centers", important focal points for meditative and exercise techniques such as qigong, martial arts in t'ai chi ch'uan, and in traditional Chinese medicine.

Imagery should not be confused with visualization. Imagery, in fact, does not require visualization at all to be effective. The objective in using imagery to enhance T'ai Chi is not to see pictures in your mind, but to pay attention, to be mindful, to train the body and mind. Imagery can utilize any or all of the senses. It certainly can include visual imagery, but may also include images of sounds, kinesthetic sensations, and even smells. When we push waves for example, we are guided to see the water, feel the waves, taste the salt on our lips, hear the gulls and feel the pull of the tide. Imagery involves all of the senses.

“Dr Kate Lorig works with groups of people who have arthritis at Stanford University. She and her colleagues also teach a combination of relaxation with imagery. Participants imagine performing exercises or skills with their joints loose and pain free. Those who use this combination regularly report less pain and improved physical and psychological functioning. In addition they make only about half of the doctor visits that they made for their arthritis before using relaxation and imagery. Woodwinds Health Campus is taking this process a step further. Patients who have had orthopedic surgery including knee and hip replacement surgery attend Joint Camp that includes inpatient group physical therapy and may attend the outpatient program that combines physical therapy, imagery, qi gong and T'ai Chi for Arthritis.”

An Excerpt from Steve Olszewski Narrative, one of our advanced students

(The full narrative on Taoists Postures and Meanings can be found on my website in the Foundational Principles Folder. It is a terrific document and well researched)

Imagery

Imagery in T'ai Chi perhaps begins with a creation story; about a snake and a bird. One story goes that San Feng Chang, the purported founder of T'ai Chi, was sipping tea and observed a crane fighting a snake. If the snake attacked the birds head, the bird responded with wings. If the snake attacked the body, the bird struck with its beak. In return, if the bird struck at the snake's head, it responded with its tail and vice-versa. If the bird struck the snakes middle, it responded with both ends. As a Taoist imbued with the ideas of nature and perhaps the *I Ching*, San Feng Chang recognized the need for not only external strength, but also internal strength and yin / yang balance, even in fighting.

The art and language of T'ai Chi encourages a practitioner to use their imagination in creating personalized internal pictures and sensations that connect one to nature and to

the work at hand. One can think of birds flying, leaves falling, clouds floating, snakes slithering, tigers being carried, monkeys being pushed, and ladies working ancient looms, just to name a few.

The creative imagery of the energies and movements available to any T'ai Chi student are only limited by one's imagination.

Imagination of the heart (*Hsin*) stimulates the mind (*Yi*) and in conjunction leads the Ch'i, the pervasive underlying human bioelectric power in all internal martial arts, and life. Where the heart/mind go the Ch'i follows. The ancient Taoists masters who created T'ai Chi understood this and imbued their art with metaphors and beautifully powerful imagery, as they structured an internally focused martial art that was much more complete than existing fighting systems of the time.

(End of excerpt)

Quotes attributed to Lao Tzu

- “Do the difficult things while they are easy and do the great things while they are small. A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.”
- “Mastering others is strength. Mastering yourself is true power.”

T'ai Chi has many levels of learning. We begin with the macro level of learning the postures like where to place your feet, how to shift your weight, how the arms, hands, fingers, waist work together to create the flow of T'ai Chi. This takes time and repetition.

At some point, you the performer begin to appreciate and understand T'ai Chi on the micro level- breathing, drawing energy in and out, silk reeling, timing, telling the story of each posture with your fingers and hands and being aware of your intuition. You become the artist, your fingers and hands the paint brushes on the canvas you are creating. It all comes in time. Patience is the ability to focus on the present. With that, when the time is right for you, the universe reveals it to you what you need to learn. When it happens, it is almost a moment of awe, certainly a moment of discovery.

Peace,

Linda

“Kindness in words creates confidence. Kindness in thinking creates profoundness. Kindness in giving creates love.” (Lao Tzu)



Qi or Chi (Chee) is the circulating life force whose existence and properties are the basis of much of the T'ai Chi philosophy and Chinese medicine. It is believed that Qi is the vital life force that flows within. There is no science to confirm whether this is true. But, people who have studied meditation, prayer, yoga, T'ai Chi, martial arts and other mindfulness activities attest to its existence. If you have had acupuncture and experienced relief from pain or discomfort, you would attest to the existence of Qi or Chi as well.

National Institutes of Health (NIH) studies have shown that acupuncture is an effective treatment alone or in combination with conventional therapies to treat many conditions. Inflammation is one of those conditions that show positive results from acupuncture.