



Linda's T'ai Chi

Weekly Handout December 6, 2020

Balance



Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished

Lao Tzu

T'ai chi helps improve balance because it targets all the physical components needed to stay upright—leg strength, flexibility, range of motion, and reflexes—all of which tend to decline with age. I know I hate that, too. Interestingly, one of T'ai Chi's biggest benefits to stability isn't physical—but emotional.

Anyone who's had a fall or who has instability has what is called a "fear of falling". (FOF) Ironically, a fear of falling is one of the biggest predictors of a fall. Fear of falling increases anxiety and results in the "stiffening strategy." Stiffening causes reduced flexibility and range of motion. Stiffening is locking joints and becoming tense and tight. All of this creates a fall situation. This stiffening can happen for some of us in our T'ai Chi postures if we enter the posture with anxiety, fear, concern or worry. It is a learned response to tighten up when we are unsure or uncertain. One of the goals of T'ai Chi is to unlearn that response.

There are three main systems that provide us with the sensory information about our bodies and the surrounding environment that we need to maintain balance. These are our eyes, our inner ear and the sensation feedback from joints in ankles, knees, spine and neck. To maintain balance, our brains must rapidly and continuously integrate and then process the sensory information received from these systems. This integration tends to slow down as we age. I know, there I go again with the age thing.

Our feet and toes are essential to maintaining balance. In particular, the big toe. The big toe bears most of our weight when standing. The toes are the gears of the engine that make the micro movements needed to stay upright, balance and to propel us forward. In T'ai Chi, our movements are rooted in the feet, controlled by the waist and expressed in our hands and fingers.

For many of us in our T'ai Chi practice, we are not afraid of falling. We are unhappy if we wobble or become tipsy while we balance on one foot. As the saying goes at the top of this letter, balance comes with time just like nature. It all gets done in time. The more we practice and focus on balance the better it gets. It just takes time. The goal is progress not perfection. T'ai Chi is considered the leading exercise to improve balance. (Harvard Medical Review)

Here are some strategies to improve balance

1. Walk on various types of surfaces: A study at the Oregon Research Institute gave support to this practice. It found that healthy but sedentary older adults significantly improved their balance by walking on special cobblestone mats (cobblestone bath mats for example) or pathways in the forest, or sidewalks. Be careful, of course, and watchful when walking on uneven surfaces.

2. Go barefoot in your home a little each day: Going barefoot gives you better control of your foot position when it strikes the ground, improves balance and body awareness, provides better foot mechanics for overall health of ankle and knees, maintains healthy range of motion, relief from ill-fitting shoes and builds stronger leg muscles. This is why the T'ai Chi shoe is soft and flexible. It is as close to barefoot as possible.

3. Make sure you stand tall from the waist: if we wobble, we tend to lean in or lean over to compensate. This makes our balance worse. So, stand tall from the waist. Dropping your other toe to provide a little stability is something you can do while you are improving your balance. Maintain the upright position of the yang style. Sometimes our balance is off when we shift our weight even a little bit to the left, right, forward or backward. So, standing tall and aligned will help. A micro movement will affect your balance.

4. Focus your eyes forward: We tend to look down at our feet when we are concerned about our balance or if we wobble. It is better to look forward about 10 feet. Eyes should be forward not downward.

5.♥ Be nice to your feet: Massage your feet daily or a few times a week. This keeps your feet healthy and keeps the tendons and muscles pliable and flexible. But, be gentle and soft as you can be. A light massage is best.

6. Stay focused on the posture you are performing: Avoid getting ahead of yourself. Focus on the here and now. I know it is hard but try and avoid building up anxiety about the next posture particularly if it is one where you tend to wobble. Frankly, I have had to overcome my anxiety about the wobble. Because of prior injuries to my ankles and knee, my balance sometimes is not as good I want it to be. So, I have the tendency to tighten up as I go into a posture requiring balance on the one foot and knee that is a problem. I can tell you; it makes it worse. So, going soft and letting your self be relaxed is the thing to do. Taking a deep breath and letting go of concern is the better strategy. Go into the posture with confidence. It works.

7. Keep your head tall and light: Avoid looking down at your feet. Instead, keep your head tall and imagine the feeling of floating to the heavens. In the T'ai Chi literature, the head is called the spirit rising. Let your head rise as you go into a posture that requires more balance.

8. Focus on staying soft and relaxed: Imagine floating on air or bobbing like a cork on a wave or a leaf twirling with the wind. Find an imagery that helps you stay soft and relaxed.

9. Fatigue and dehydration: If you are not at your best and you feel tired or not hydrated enough, your balance will be worse. So, drink water before each class and afterward.

Some exercises to help with balance

In class this week, I will demonstrate an easy and effective way to improve balance. It is easy but doing it every day is best. Here are some others to try. Most PT would suggest doing these 3 times a day. They only take a few minutes.

Exercise One

- Stand directly behind a table or chair and place your feet slightly apart.
- Lift one leg six inches out to the side.
- Hold this position for 10 seconds.
- Repeat with the opposite leg.
- Close your eyes to make it more challenging

Exercise Two

- Stand directly behind a table or chair and place your feet slightly apart.
- Slowly bend one knee toward your chest lifting your foot six inches off the floor.
- Hold this position for 10 seconds.
- Repeat with the opposite leg.
- Close your eyes to make it more challenging

Exercise Three

- Stand directly behind a table or chair and place your feet slightly apart.
- Lift one leg straight back, keeping your knee straight.
- Hold this position for 10 seconds.
- Repeat with the opposite leg.
- More challenging: close your eyes while you do it.



I title this one: Show- off

Be safe and well,
Peace and gratitude,
Linda

